Sulfur 19

A TRIBUTE TO PORFIRIO DIDONNA

NORMAN O. BROWN ON ROBERT DUNCAN

MADAME EDWARDA BY GEORGES BATAILLE

POETRY BY SIMIC, ASHBERY & WAKOSKI

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SULFUR magazine has its main offices c/o English Department, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti MI 48197 (313-483-9787). There is a west coast office at 11864 Idaho #5, LA 90025 CA. Subscriptions are $15 a year for individuals, $22 for institutions (3 issues). Single copy: $6. #19 is Volume VII, #1. Foreign subscriptions including Canada add $3 for surface mail, $12 for airmail postage. Make all checks payable to SULFUR in U.S. currency. Back issues (except #1) still available. No manuscripts will be returned unless accompanied SASE. ISSN #: 0730-305X.

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DESIGN AND TYPOGRAPHY BY BARBARA MARTIN

TYPESET BY LAZERTYPE, P.O. BOX 5471, SANTA ROSA, CA 95402

Sulfur

SPRING 1987

A LITERARY TRI-QUARTERLY OF THE WHOLE ART

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COVER: PORFIRIO DIDONNA / Untitled / *Oil on Linen / 72" x 48" / 1985 / Color transparancy courtesy of Nielsen Gallery, Boston*

Nancy Spero Artwork courtesy of Josh Baer Gallery, NYC

Porfirio DiDonna Artwork courtesy of Nielsen Gallery, Boston

The Starn Twins Artwork courtesy of Stux Gallery, NYC

1987 issues of SULFUR are made possible in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the California Arts Council, and the Arts Foundation of Michigan.

JOHN YAU

Three Poems

GHENGIS CHAN, PRIVATE EYE

I was floating through a cross section
with my dusty wine glass, when she entered,
a shivering bundle of shredded starlight.
You don't need words to tell a story,
a gesture will do. These days,
we are all parasites looking for a body
to cling to. I'm nothing more than
riffraff splendor drifting past the runway.
I always keep a supply of lamprey lipstick around,
just in case. She laughed,
a slashed melody of small shrugs.
It had been raining in her left eye.
She began: a cloud or story
broken in three maybe four places,
wooden eyelids, and a scarf of human hair.
She paused: I offer you dervish bleakness
and glistening sediment. It was late
and we were getting jammed in deep.
I was on the other side, staring at
the snow covered moon pasted above the park.
A foul lump started making promises in my voice.

THE CASE

I looked down, more slender than
I expected
She was wearing
white under gray blond curls
dropped back and turned into a block

Across the room, a mirror
had been drained from the top

Clouds buzzed by above bergeoning trees
their neat brochures

Her apartment had been flung open
ceilings nibbled at corners

She lasted longer than we expected
refusing to hang up her ashes

An ignorant sponge, I had been summoned
to the gate of no mistakes

In less than half a pedal of time
I would be entering the hyena zone

CHORAL AMPHISBAENA

I am learning to see
with my other brain

On the shelves closest to the cloud stations
meteors spiral into cool autumn ponds

Sapphire wisps rise from blue membranes
while radium seeps out of the stalks

I am the younger sister
you never notices

until the rain washed away
the last traces of lipstick

He spent the morning ripping out
the pages of an illustrated novel

then replacing each word with one
consuming less letters

Last night I wore cotton
pearl, alligator, and plastic

Shortly after the waiter
brought our appetizers

a band of apivorous crones
began roaming through the park

I am the pimply boy
who delivers pizzas to burning houses

They parked their motorcycles in a circle
and filed into the courtyard

Somewhere someone
was boiling shoes

I am the silky rodent
who pulls the carriage

from one end of the sentence
to the other

I have been told that I look happy
for brief periods

most often when passing
a snow covered golf course

CHARLES SIMIC

Three Poems

COLLARD GREENS AND BLACK-EYE PEAS

for Clark Coolidge

"The height of the church, the thought
of who is missing"

To know the absolute
And savor the all-consuming clarity.
To think, to think continually
Among the apparitions—
The lovely little streets that go nowhere,
Their diffident signs, unsure doorways,
Obscure shop-windows, mannequins of doubt
Wearing latest fashion of ambiguity and doubt.

On the square of the Great Misgiving,
By the equestrian statue of the Undecided Ancestor,
I met no one and everyone:
Nailed-up ears, myopes, mantichores
And their cousins the measuring worms.
Street-cleaners. Fly-catchers
For the mouths of tyrants. Legs of mutton
In hot pants. Illustrious Arachnids.
Metaphysical onion-peelers. Ghostly
Pot-scrapers. Gravy tasters
Who have read Herman Melville.
Pigs cooked in white wine.
Patchers of old shoes. Chittlings
Spattered with the mustard of the innocent
And dressed in judges' black robes.
Bishops with elephantine testicles.
Astrologers in red sneakers. Teeth-chatterers
In droves. Tragic heroes in various kinds of salads. . .

"O hangman's rope by which the heavy planet is suspended!"

I was like Icarus's dog, barking at the sun and the moon,
Sniffing around, tarrying
By perilous bloody ways—
Dark dead-end alleys of the heart,
Little graveyards for ventriloquists. . .

Romeo was a handsome purse-snatcher.
Abelard peddled out of a suitcase:
Plastic wind-up toys with my face on them.
The century in its dotage.
The Land of Chimera for sale.
I wanted the sparrow Lesbia kept,
The little cracked mirror from its cage.
A fool supreme standing outside the storefront
Church of the Ephemeron,
Two doors down from the Theatre of Impermanence,
To catch my breath as it flees on a yellow bicycle,
Saint Theresa's bicycle.
The onset of evening—on stilts.
Starless evening like a chesspiece being moved in China—
A black piece—

The "amazing" Bud Powell hunched over the piano,
And playing one single note
With the first finger of the right hand
On which a nail has been bitten off.

MY FATHER'S DREAM

He's writing the History of Silence
In a city where no word is spoken.
Outside his window huge crowds of men and women
Are going about their ghostly noiseless errands.

There are black armbands worn by voiceless teachers
In a smoke-shrouded schoolhouse:
Rows of pale, tight-lipped children:
Pencil-stubs with small teeth marks on them.

The tragic actor's gestures certain trees have
On a street with a pet shop,
A large empty cage in its window
And the snow falling soundlessly.

Evening at midday; centuries of such light,
Gray and threadbare like the winter coat
Of that woman on the sidewalk dumb with rage
For not being able to kill her soldier son.

THE BIG MACHINE

The garden of the machine at night
Like a garden of carnivorous plants.
There goes the mad doctor in short pants
Wielding a butterfly net.

Hairpins, shaving mirrors, blown-up condoms
With spikes—or they might be levers,
Pulleys, dangling counterweights
Enacting their shadow-farces and tragedies.

Is it a lady's dainty slipper
They're raising or lowering,
Or the ghost of itself
Riding an empty swing?

The Monster who can't tell,
Plugs himself into an electric outlet
And gathers a spray
Of pig-iron immortelles.

NORMAN O. BROWN

Cleveland State University Poetry Center Jubilation of Poets Panel, "Homage to Robert Duncan," October 23, 1986

GROUND WORK: Before the War

GW, 36 *"Santa Cruz Propositions" [10PM–1AM, 13–14, October 1968]*

Troubled surfer

I introduced Robert Duncan at Santa Cruz as "happy melodist, unwearied," etc. I have not forgotten the pained expression on his face.

Troubled surfer

In a letter to me March 1/1969, enclosing his Job poem, *"Ancient Questions"*—

GW, 6 *What instigator hid among these notes*
painful harmonies in the song we sing?

Duncan writes: *You and I share that we are drawn to work in what will be too much for us. To conquer what is fearful? No wonder the admonitions felt in JOB are troubling. (In "An Imaginary Woman" the She of the poem instructed me —that was in 1952—and I was just beginning to search out her environs:*

Thirst not
The Well is full.
Do not trouble the water.)

But it is our calling to trouble the water, Nobby. And needs all the (most happily) inspirations of our imagination or (most unhappily) cunning of our art to obey the "Do not trouble the water" to mean troubling the water.

"Do not trouble the water" to mean troubling the water. That is the cunning of his art. Robert goes on to say, commenting on my still to this day unfinished, unperfyte, Metamorphoses, *"I am the more acutely aware of the trouble troubling the water brings and I know no strength in that trouble except faith and most important that it is as we know it is blind."*

The spirit of Robert Duncan

Troubled surfer seeking the about-to-break line
of the wave in it to ride toward revelation,
the tide that would have carried you draws back
from the litterd margin,
and the depth of the sea you would have borne forward
is the depth of an impending failure among us who
if we fall from the board, as we must,
fall into the facts of the polluted stream.

Like Sam Patch. The trouble is the language. "Speech had failed him.

Paterson, 27 He was confused. The word had been drained of its meaning. He struck the water on his side and disappeared."

Duncan's long oceanic line—old Ocean rolls a lengthened wave to shore—

BB, 20

runs away with me
and I enter the wave of it.
How long have I been waiting,
the language, the sea, the body

The limits of language

BB, 24 *at the lips before speech, at life's*
labia

BB, 19 *is language Pythagoras knew*

BB, 9 *For the even is bounded, but the uneven is without bounds and there is no way through or out of it.*

Olson At the boundary of the mighty world

BB, 9 *Her-Without-Bounds*

FW, 104 Her rill be run, unhemmed as it is uneven!

Transcending

GW, 12 *ascending to where the beat breaks*
into an all-but-unbearable whirling crown
of feet dancing, and now he sings or it is
the light singing, the voice
shaking, in the throes of the coming melody,
resonances of meaning exceeding what we
understand. . . .
speaking in tongues.

GW, 30 *and the forces of Speech give way to the Language beyond Speech,*
the Sea the sea reminds us of,

Without bounds

OF, 70 *Undo the bindings of immutable syntax!*

"Let the human Mind loose! It must be loose!
It will be loose!" (John Adams)

GW, 22 *To unglue the up-tight esthetics*
undo your mind from metric
standards, let space and time
surpass your uses—
It must be made loose!

Dionysos in Amerika

RB, 69 *but the sistrum*
sounds through us

God-awful

BB, 34 *He draws the sounds forth from his drunken violin*
Bacchus in delirium cuts from the stone with a saw.

What god

GW, 6 *What instigator hid among these notes*
painful harmonies in the song we sing?

D, 22 *The fire was the war*
FW, 250 A burning world is come to dance inane
Dance by the light of the war.

It is always Life at War, Essay at War
D, 13 *or we are always at war.*

Passages
BB, 128 *between surpassing*
Crises of war.

D, 16 *listening to the nightingale*
in the midst of the slaughter.

The blood

BB, 79 *streams from the bodies of his sons*
to feed the voice of Gassire's lute.

I have had a hard time fighting my way against the HD Book; this too a record of struggle. I too have a theosophical mother.

Poems are as Duncan says not objects but events; but not events like the celebration of a mass, for a separate community of gnostics, initiates, poets and philosophers, an aristocracy of emotion; witnesses to the beatific vision, over the
TLM, 58, 63 shambles; "the reality of a divine history within what men call history"; a Form of Forms within which all events are redeemed—

Poems are real events in real history; Korean War, Vietnam War; real struggles with unconscionable reality, the facts of
Oppen the polluted stream. Always and everyday "the question whe-
Interview, 162 ther or not we can deal with humanity as something which actually does exist."

The poem including history. Including the defects inherent in a record of struggle. The incorporation of struggle as form—
CJ, 19 Duncan on Pound: *No other work so contains or shows forth the troubled spirit of our times: it is his genius that even*

where he presents flashes of eternal mind—veritas, claritas, hilaritas—he does not sublimate but remains involved, by defect, in the agony of the contemporary.

The Truth and Life of a Man. The New American Poetry: who touches this touches a man. Or a woman in wartime, like HD. Or ED; whose Life had stood—a Loaded Gun.

Love's Body, 266

I once said "There is only poetry." *"Santa Cruz Propositions":*

GW, 36

Poetry! Would **Poetry** *have sustained us? It's lovely*
—and no more than a wave— to have rise
out of the debris, the stink and threat
—even to life— of daily speech, the roar
of the giants we begin from,
primordial Strife, blind Opposition,
a current that sweeps all stagnant things up
into a torrent of confidence beyond thought.

Even as we are most "sent", and the Man
most present, exultant in the giving ourselves over
to the forces that consume our knowledge, whatever
fact having no more boundary than
water within water, and for you then most

the **cold** *of the sea, the withdrawal from pleasure,*

the curve of the poem

withdraws its promise.

They are not **with** *it! —you are not with it!*

The very luminous where-with-all, the lure

looms now over all Truth collapsing.

The poem cuts to bring

BB, 128

the camera in upon the gaping neck
which now is an eye of bloody meat

The Santa Cruz murders

GW, 41 *"as brought to you by the people of the Free Universe"*

Hidden under trees, however, are the camps of young people with wild hair and outlandish customs

GW, 44 *–it was the music of the Tarot that moved him—*

GW, 45 *Kali dancing, whirling her necklace of skulls, trampling the despoiling armies and the exploiters of natural resourc under her feet. Revolution or Death!*

Dionysos in Amerika.

D, 13 *The poem designed so.*
To emit great snores
or death's confusions.

Against beauty as such.

D, 23 *He conceives the poem*
as a shattered pitcher of rock crystal,
its more-than-language not in the form
but in the intrigue of lines, the shattering,
the inability .

Or he conceives the poem as a mind dying
—that is, a mind dividing itself
from itself. The line divides.

There is something Christian about it, or should I say Messianic; the Suffering Servant. Isaiah LIII, v. 2: He has no form nor beauty, no looks to attract our eyes. A pieta, or crucifixion; a compassion.

D, 21 *So this ordinary G.I. stript to the waist*
carrying the wounded
American soldier in his arms
repeats in his hot Korean summer
a pièta.

He is like a nakedness of speech
shedding its words; or

Love's Body, 189

There is something Christian about the new poetics. Open is broken form. The body broken. Abrupt, uneven.

(Going back to Hopkins:

Brute beauty and valor and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

Or Mandelstam in the Russian Revolution:

A new heroic age has begun in the life of the word. The word is flesh and bread. It shares the fate of bread and flesh: suffering. People are hungry. Still hungrier is the state. But there is something even hungrier: time.

Oppen:

Where the earth is most torn
And the wounds untended and the voices confused,
There is the head of the moving column

The God that failed. It must fail. *"An Essay at War"*—

D, 22

You see, what I feel is needed at this point is a nadir, a breakdown, a failure of heart or of vision . . . . The poem defeated . . . .we were bound to fail.

The beatific vision

D, 19

A dream. . .

in that ***profonda e chiara sussistenza***

or a drain. . .

blood, urine, shit, giving ourselves up, this

falling away,
falling

face forward

Poetry de profundis, or in extremis

Or., 42-3 *The mystery of the whole thing in which nails, blood, and cry, the Eli, Eli, lama sabacthani, is the crisis of the poem enacted.*

Poetry as act of desperation, or only refuge from despair; the bright light of shipwreck.

Oppen

Imagine a man in the ditch,
The wheels of the overturned wreck
Still spinning—

I don't mean he despairs, I mean if he does not
He sees in the manner of poetry

His God Logos, the language fails him. And yet he speaks.

BB, 133 *We have lost. No,*
we have not lost our way

D, 16 *Singing like troubadours in Albi or Toulouse*
As if in spite of . . .

As if in spite of
We pretend to speak

GW, 21 *We pretend to speak. The language is not ours and we move upward beyond our powers into*

words again beyond us unsure measures

the poetry of the cosmos

τὸ κάλλος τῶν νοημάτων τῆς κοσμοποιίας

transcending
speech and hearing λόγον καὶ ἀκοὴν *faltering.*

BB, 128 *PASSAGES 30* *STAGE DIRECTIONS*

"It's not so, not strictly so,
that's the trouble," *Ezra Pound, Venice 1964*

We pretend to speak. The language is not ours

BB, 131 ***Melodramatic***

His language, and from his troubled mind
Echoes of speeches, incantations, wild prayers,
As if to teach us "the perfection of certain ideals,
the depravity of others"

BB, 61 The Perfect Sermon of Hermes Trismegistus

GW, 35 *against the works of unworthy men, unfeeling judgments, and cruel deeds.*

Perfect Sermon of a Victorian clergyman (David Bromige)

BB, 40 *Do you know the old language?*

I do not know the old language

We pretend to speak
Grand Miraj MIRAJ

BB, 60 *Grand Miraj! It is the Sun, the fiery ball*

that ascends my heart, breaking from his horizon

blue in which He rides. Great Impersonator!

Surrogate!

Grand Miraj
Dante's Miraj
Cat., 135 *the spiritual transportations of the Sufi Recital*

Muhammad mounting on Buraq

BB, 122 Duncan mounting on *Pegasos / that great horse Poetry*

Chittick, 214, 80 There is the Buraq of Love: Mount upon Love and think not about the way! For the horse of Love is very sure-footed. Rumi says there is also the Buraq of non-existence, a wonderful steed for the ascent. It does not appear that Duncan has used the Buraq of non-existence.

Pegasus

BB, 132 *beneath whose hooves once again*
new springs are loosed on Helicon.

BB, 131 *Sublime*
Forbidden intensities

Ir., 32C *—"God"'s but Mind's hint at the Sublime*

Sublime
To Greet the Return of the Gods
But not the Beautiful Gods of Greece

D, 14 *The individual Hermes-Dionysos*
perfectly shown,

Again he speaks in thunder and in fire!

BB, 34 *Release the thunders*

from this cloud that gathers impending

song.

The Ten Thunders of Finnegans Wake
the idjaz of the Koran
sublimity the only proof of its divinity: the miracle of its style literally, "the rendering incapable, powerless."

Duncan has spoken of the extreme difficulty in *Passages* 17, as Hermes speaks delivering his "Perfect Sermon":

Maps, 54-5 *The poet performing must move into the high priesthood in which the official speaks in the god's person. . . .The voice of the man falters and must brave the heart in which he fails to give himself over, inept as he is, to the troubling sublimity of the concept. . . .Beyond the poet's daring to write once more in this high voice lies his vision of others who are here announced, poets who will chant once more with the voice of the Upanishads and Sutras, of the Songs of Solomon and the Psalms of David.*

Great Impersonator! Surrogate!

GW, 168 *for the sake of a rime not yet arrived*
containing again and again resonant arrivals.

Matthew XI, v. 3: Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?

Duncan did not listen to William Carlos Williams saying "Not prophecy! NOT prophecy! but the thing itself!"
Who will say him no?

BB, 120 *TRANSGRESSING THE REAL PASSAGES 27*

In the War now I make

a celestial cave, a tent of the Night

(under the cloak of his poem he retires

invisible

for my thoughts are servants of the stars

A Surah is it, or a Sermon from the Commander of the Faithful

For now in my mind all the young men of my time
have withdrawn allegiance from this world, from public things

and as our studies in irreality deepen,

industries, businesses, universities, armies

shudder and cease

Performative language, or "Stage Directions."

In the hospital recently Duncan
greatly troubled
was reading the Koran.
After leaving the hospital, he was no longer reading the Koran. I sent him the piece I had written on Surah XVIII, The Cave, "The Apocalypse of Islam."

To learn the simplest things (GROUND WORK

GW, 18 *Child of a century more skeptic than*
unbelieving, adrift
between two contrary educations,
that of the Revolution, which disowns
everything,
and that of the Reaction,
which pretends to bring back the ensemble
of Christian beliefs,

will I find myself traind to believe
everything,

as our fathers, the scientists, have been

traind to deny?

OF, 96 *Flickers of unlikely heat*
at the edge of our belief bud forth.

NOTES

The citations from the works of Robert Duncan:
BB = *Bending the Bow* (New York: New Directions, 1968)
D = *Derivations* (London: Fulcrum, 1968)
GW = *Ground Work* (New York: New Directions, 1984)
OF = *The Opening of the Field* (New York: Grove, 1960)
RB = *Roots and Branches* (New York: Scribner's, 1964)
TLM = *The Truth and Life of Myth* (New York: House of Books, 1968)
Cat. = "Rites of Participation, Part II" *Caterpillar* 2 (January 1968), 125-154.
CJ = "Beginnings: Chapter 1 of the HD Book, Part I" *Coyote's Journal* 5/6 (1966), 831.
Ir. = "At the Door," *Ironwood* 22 (1983), 32A-D.
Maps = "Preface to a Reading of Passages 1-22," *Maps* 6 (1974), 53-5.
Or. = "From the Day Book," *Origin* NS 10 (July 1963), 1-47.

The other texts that entered into my text are:
W. C. Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1946-51)
C. Olson, *Maximus Poems* IV, V, XI (London: Cape Goliard, 1968)
FW = J. Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Viking, 1966)
G. Oppen, "Of Being Numerous," "Route," *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1975)
G. Oppen, Interview, *Contemporary Literature* 10 (1969), 159-177.
G. M. Hopkins, "The Windhover: To Christ our Lord"
O. Mandelstam, "The Word and Culture," *Selected Essays*, Tr. S. Monas (Austin: Univ. of Texas, 1977), 49-53.

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D. Bromige, "Beyond Prediction," *Credences* II (July 1975), 101-113.
N. Mackey, "Gassire's Lute: Robert Duncan's Vietnam War Poems" (unpublished MS)
N. O. Brown, *Love's Body* (New York: Random House, 1966)
N. O. Brown, "The Apocalypse of Islam," *Social Text* 8 (Winter 1983/84), 155-171.

JOHN TAGGART

Two Poems

IN ITSELF

The line exemplifies, embodies;
it is in itself metaphor.
—Robert Duncan

In itself it is in itself that the line is metaphor
in repetition in the repetition within the line
repetition is choice each repetition a choice rechosen
constant repetition in the line a constant choosing
what is chosen is the metaphor image of the metaphor.

Image of the metaphor image product of metaphor process
product of metaphor process and product of the line
Zukofsky: "it ought to be involved in the cadence"
what is to be seen involved in what is to be heard
what heard what seen what I choose to hear and to see.

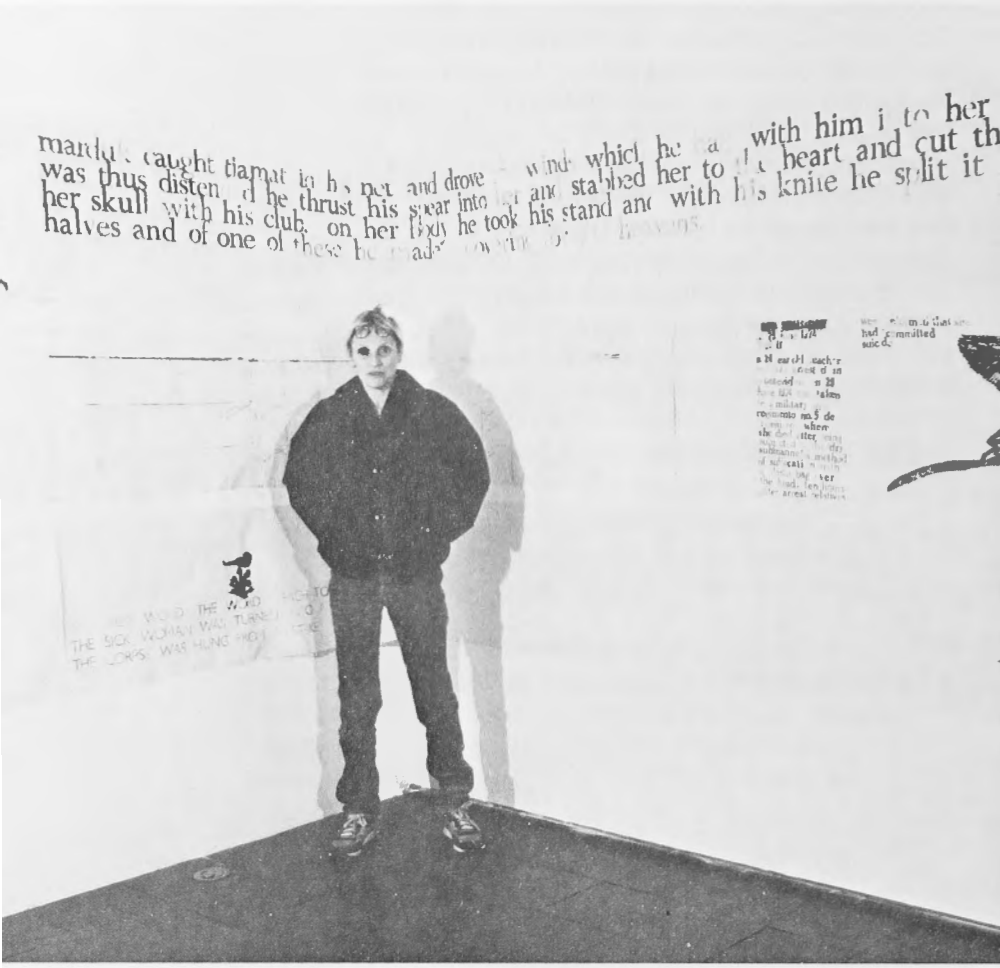
What's seen what's chosen is the image of the voice
the image breaks through closed spaces clouds and fences
I had thought these forms of words could not be opened
image in the line breaks through paw of an animal
image of the voice what I hear what I'm chosen to see.

SPEEDED UP PLAYED FASTER

The slow the small steps are speeded up played faster
the teacher shows her pupil how to play faster
speeded up the slow the small here comes the bride steps
how to play faster teacher shows her pupil how
they make an intertwined trio with the keyboard
hand on her shoulder hand guiding her pupil's hand
intertwined hands their hands faster on the keyboard
how to play faster teacher shows her pupil how
speeded up the slow the small steps as in a dream
they make an intertwined trio completely free
they are free among lights in a dark wood
they are free among submerged lights glimmering off and on
how to play faster the teacher shows her pupil
speeded up all the steps of their composition
they make an intertwined trio with the keyboard
hand on her shoulder hand guiding her pupil's hand
intertwined hands their hands faster on the keyboard
speeded up how the teacher shows her pupil how.

NANCY SPERO

from the *Torture of Women* series



This series consists of 20" x 25' panels, utilizing painting and typewriter collage on paper. With the exception of the 5th page of Spero artwork (which is the entire panel 11), the reproductions in Sulfur are details from these panels. On this page, Nancy Spero is photographed before several panels of this work at the New Museum, NYC, February 1984.

ith him i to her body and whilst he
heart and cut through her bowels a
knife he split it like a flat fish into

SUMMARY
June 1974
AY

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as arrested in
evidence on 29
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arrest relatives

were informed that she
had committed
suicide.

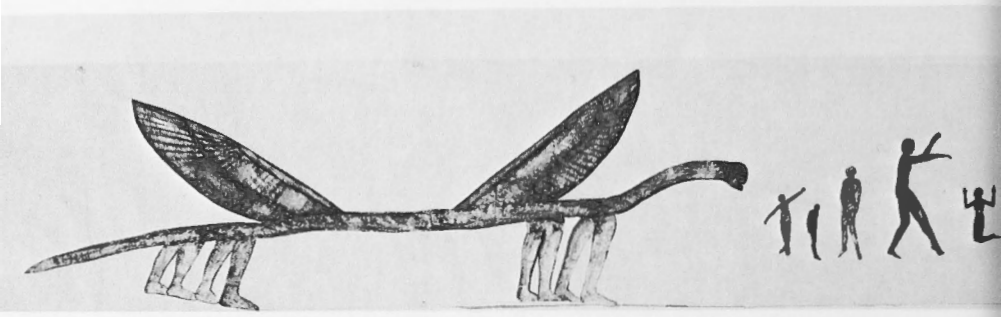
Torture today is essentially a state activity. ...the preconditi

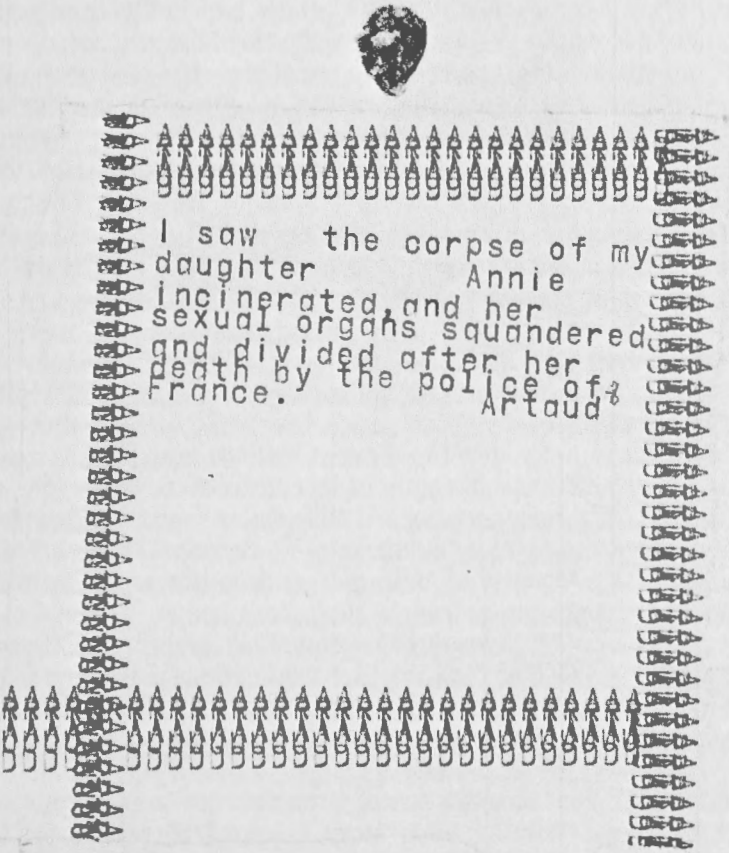
for torture make it almost the exclusive province of the state. Torture requires that the victim be kept under the physical control of the torturer.[9]

CHILE

MARTA NEIRA, a 23 year old model was arrested last dec. 9 in santiago by DINA, chiles brutal secret police. according to a prisoners' report smuggled out of the pirque women's prison, when marta was last seen inside the quilapayun detention center on christmas eve 1974, her nose was broken and she had welts all over her. she had been subjected to electric shocks and to sexual abuse.

...this young victim of DINA is among at least 1,500 chileans who have disappeared since the military, led by general augusto pinochet ugarte seized power in sept. 1973.




I saw the corpse of my
daughter Annie
incinerated, and her
sexual organs squandered
and divided after her
death by the police of
France.
Artaud

JON BIRD

from *Nancy Spero: 1954-1986** on the "Torture of Women" series

Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, begins his analysis of the historical evolution of punishment as a political technology of the body, by quoting first from an 18th century description of a public torture and execution, and then from an account of the regime of order and control within a juvenile prison in Paris just eighty years later, concluding from the contrast that "a few decades saw the disappearance of the tortured, dismembered, amputated body, symbolically branded on the face or shoulder, exposed dead or alive to the public view." A reading of the recorded incidents of the torture of women in Nancy Spero's "Torture of Women," excerpted from Amnesty International Reports, would suggest that the legitimated assault upon the body is, in fact, a constant occurrence and reminder of the vulnerability of civil society and its social and familial forms on a global scale, from the torture chambers of Fascist juntas to the exercise of hegemonic masculinity within the home.

Spero describes "Torture of Women" as her first explicitly feminist work, although the symbiosis of phallic power and legitimated violence is a constant theme of the "War" series. Much of the recent theoretical work upon masculinity, developed out of feminist analysis, has stressed the discursive and unstable nature of its construction. However, some specific forms and representations of male desire suggest a centering of identity around key psychic "moments"—for instance, of combat as our sole access to the intensity of *jouissance*, or of torture as the exercise of absolute (sovereign) power over a subjugated body—moments of the total experience and expression of hegemonic masculinity: rape, pornography and war. It is the points at which the fiction of masculine subjectivity intersects with the relations of power that the effects are likely to be most catastrophic for women.

"Torture of Women" recounts acts of torture using a large bulletin typewriter to increase visibility. Each "story" is irregularly printed as a fragmented and uneven metaphor for the physical body under duress. Accompanying these obscene case histories is a monstrous regiment, a

* These paragraphs (with Spero herself speaking in the italicized ones) are taken from Bird's catalog essay for the Nancy Spero Retrospective at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, March 11-April 12, 1987.

bestiary of fantastic and mythological creatures and figures. In this company we also again encounter excerpts from Artaud's tortured imaginings, and the Sumerian myth of Marduk and Tiamat—the ritual dismembering of the fish goddess by the sun god Marduk, to form the vaults of heaven and the underworld. Both in their separate ways are analogous with the technologies of pain recorded throughout the work. Amounting to a taxonomy of the terroristic effects of phallic power and domination, they operate at the edge of the social, unleashed upon the woman's body.

In the whole context of Spero's work, "victim" takes on a range of significations—not simply the description of the one who is the object of aggression, but of the fundamental incommensurability of power relations between oppressor and oppressed; not only the suffering of a wrong, but also of the inability to even state or prove, let alone right, that wrong; to, in fact, fall between the discourses—historical, juridical, ethical, political—that legitimate the event. The *logos* institutes a regime of sense that operates rules of inclusion and exclusion, of what can or cannot be put into discourse. Spero's work, like other feminist practices, bends the rules. By overlapping and interweaving the normally distinct and hierarchical orders of signification, mixing-up the descriptive, evaluative, cognitive, and prescriptive, she challenges pre-determined positions to, in effect, change the world.

Perhaps there are many more male political prisoners than female, but I decided in addressing the problem of torture, to emphasize only women. Both men and women are sexually abused in torture centres, but for women sexual assault is always central to attacks upon the body—frequently the woman becomes impregnated by the guards. So woman has the status of victim "par excellence" from time immemorial, as is evidenced by the quote I include of Marduk catching Tiamat in his net, brutalizing and then idealising her—"and with his knife he split (her body) like a flat fish into two halves, and one of these he made into a covering for the heavens."

By using transformed Egyptian serpents with female-like heads sticking their tongues out, adding breasts to one of them, taking the legs off another, adding a woman with a gun climbing up the back of a serpent, I felt I was allowing monsters in ambiguous form to come into the work. All the figures that I put into "Torture of Women" are ambiguous in the sense that they are not illustrations of pain or of a victimised sense of

being, apart from one image that I've used repeatedly—the "Sky Goddess"—half woman, half animal, bent over with four breasts. In this instance she is confined in a cell-like grid to suggest a very small and containing area.

In one of the sections I have a serpent observing a group of five metallically painted figures of assorted sizes involved in a sort of dance, and I deliberately left the spatial proximity of the monster to the figures unclear. I felt in this work that if there was to be any intimation of hope at all, then it would be expressed by the women's ritualistic dance of transcendence from a life in hell—the lived experience of women political prisoners. In this respect, in the opening panel I have the phrase "Explicit Explanation," taken from the Book of the Apocalypse because, in one sense, this is an explicit explanation of hell.

For the actual accounts of torture I used a bulletin typewriter because I wanted them to read clearly, perhaps like the effects of a newspaper account, or a broadsheet or a teletype. I made mistakes in typing the case histories, and I'd correct them and cut out some of the most obscured words so that they might convey the hesitant and incoherent manner of their telling. Also I hoped that the starkness of the bulletin type would emphasize the isolation of the individual women, and that the white spaces would signify silences—a respite from the documented histories.

PIERRE JORIS

from "Winnetou Old"

Vier Takte for K time then before
starting a poesis that keeps that other that
began in bone arete return to turbulence break
the slippery line to work thanatos tetanos Verkrampfung /
second movement process of individuation social
aspects in aspic hides a soul caught already encysted
blastula reaps a soul in titanic paralysis the
horizon inked end of my life there rises frostbite
blaming outside genetics the seas a tree a cloud a clubfoot /
this homunculus frozen brass monkey bone monkey
teton titan peeled of all flesh & fleas all noise &
bloodroar all Staub und Blut ein Würfel Milch

black millenium cramp has torqued all
muscle into solid bone *os* os bone bone Knochen
or meine Gebeine the bone titan a crouching knot-
sayer a preventer a not-sayer a stop-gap bony
head wedged into that opening in the self that is the
self slash through which soul flows into the world
usurper of the quickening pulse rides inside a stone rage
a congealed black hole moon key key hatred cancer

Note Re: *Winnetou*

Winnetou is an Apache chief invented by the late 19C German pop-fiction writer Karl May as side-kick for his main narrator & pseudo-autobiographical hero, Old Shatterhand, the schmaltzy white Christian "Westman" who will have managed to teach Winnetou Christian mores & writing by the time the latter is killed off. These figures have haunted European adolescences (at least in the German-speaking regions) for over a hundred years. (For more on May, cf. Frederic Morton's article *Tales of the Grand Teutons* in the N.Y. Times Book Review, January 4, 1987. Better still, see Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's 1974 film "Karl May.")

In my youth, I indentified totally with Winnetou (never with Shatterhand) who for me, as I know now, was clearly the figure of the other. Winnetou came back to me two years ago when in a trance-like meditation I asked for a guide-figure for a work I was undertaking then. He came back as a haggard, wizened old Indian, the near-Blakean figure of Europe's Other & indeed offered to lead me through the cultural charnel house of Europe.

romance blastulated frippery of fibromous death cult /
absolute balance no clinamen

staccato stasis howl this alphabet
go away don't hurl this relapse into bone again
no gain this stone-monkey Europe post no inter-
glacial basin from its dead foam no Aphrodite no
fatassed goddess kalypigian woman scraggy pigeons of
Paris Rome London Berlin carriers of Krakow diseases
kill the messengers from Budapest the plague is /
no turbulence

breath learn how to breathe with eyes
closed break now the slippery line carry on Winnetou
old now called Taranta in the vision a clearing a one-
room school-house part swiss chalet part frontier log cabin
part greek temple an old mescalero apache in rags of white
hair with a ball of light yarn in his right hand /
itschli is dead he walks in rubber Good Year sandals the
light yarn ball raised his hand raised all salutes
resemble each other

IBM staccato rage make it flow blood not
I-slash make it over again into daily sashimi cut from
between your ribs toro of belly toro of Gloucester
make merry haha only through power can we churn the
yourappian mind around & around here come aus Deutschland /
that battering figure of bone-monkey break the ice /
reclaim use of bone subarctic steppes double-sealed in
Deutschland aus Deutschland ein Würfel Stroh ein Nichts
aus Erde metal-blue Aries comes across a milled universe /
Universum für junge Menschen comes across the heart-bunker /
limits of any city retrace the subway steppes in strong
Indian ink all alone with Winnetou old Tamburlaine
Turbulence dead already amazing names more than fishwives /
caretakers of the world

sound gethsemanes spell through hell's
landscapes a cardiovascular ease a momentary you wakes
a sentence now another night lifts off the rooftops in
anger its load a cynical serial of political nightmares /
you turned your back accused me of lack of romanticism /
the fragrance of passion the smell of death hides behind /

the fragrance of new sheets bone gags anger that narrow
mood ram's head hurtling pike's mouth gasping water /
shoots an old turbulence comes riding

there is unfinished business on this front /
it is new it is not new it goes west west the Urals
a spine Nestorian wave-forms rattus rattus rattus only
antigens can cross a bilaterally proliferating earth
don't you realise you could die any minute have done
so for so long already to break la nuit américaine
translates as European day here comes Autonomia rises
against the faked night of Hollywood paper jungles oh Ez
you went off the black edge of Europe should have known
peace is war continued with other means it will not
rise in the east oh sol hearse of so much claptrap

yourappian Kulchur hang the big O
l'outre l'autre now becomes au-tonomia another alphabeta
begins towards mania l'aetera ô become au begins
towards dawn drawn with your fingers in shellacked snows
of old we have learned nothing from millenia your
defense the great meltdown domination domination of the
planets Uranus hello Mario Tronti Tony Negri Sergio
Bologna Franco Piperno Oreste Scalzone hello & good-bye /
you too the night of europe the workers no longer the edge /
will lift the whole construaimo une nova vita no longer /
the definite article

it is now a a aaaa many aaaaas /
construoaimo u-naaaa I love to build on declensions /
out of the east where the sun has entered the ass of
the bone monkey the squatting monkey hands out its
asshairs a rectum swallows it all back up ur-mouth /
ur-fear sun-eater schreber Herr Doktor father
father father tetanos bone-monkey bone-setter
stammers here your small sun unlanguaged sandwich
between four a word a corpse from memory come back
can I come back poling me mori I die cast myself a
corpse ex changes color color rubor dolor

unhanded I feel it there thumb makes
fifth first column in again la nuit américaine night /
I had night shade & shed nuire & noise noise to draw

the night with let it drawn lance turba ya ya ya /
the thing about Hermes is wings at his feet all other
attributes & functions don't matter derived but how
do I know where to move brownian movement delusion
vectorial even that ball of light yarn purpose or will
will dance a chaconne each to his own dispersals sparag-
mos of love torn between her & himself only hate makes
whole that earlier figure the unbroken egg before
caterpillar & break the shell in skull anger bone
hurt brain too only viscera mush schlupping about

oh in terror to type this alphabet of
self this ur-sauce reduces towards death bad sun in
solar plexus bitter biter you stole the days's first
grace & pleasure the head of Orpheus keeps singing a
mouth full of water full of milk full of teeth heads
bop on waves maternal waves waves a pen in vermillion
sky merde it will never stop right there wriggling
earthworm left behind left wet behind wig wig wiggle
the ears a milk shake of cosmic proportions proteus
athos & porthos all the garçonnes dance around the mummy
head miffed breath it cannot go on end of century chaconne /
head now of osiris no a jackal guards the door to
charnel house Europe

read it anyway you can she said the
stormbarrier broke turbulence rusted the brass heart in
bone froze & whirled will never stop now sharp fracture
gleam at the edge of world whirl that gags me gaïa
cannot hold on to muumy-being this is not analysis this is
other molecular happening beneath old certainties somewhere
else always always a displaced somehow discarded discord
left behind I can see my whole body if you have never carried
a corpse you cannot know the weight of your own body
someone said this in Europe

& I cannot make it back from behind the
barn at Asselscheuer we played sticky fingers musk of
oxen cows pigshit underneath & I cannot make it
back I take it back your eurappian origins flood
against african cervix a system of different heat-levels /
creates flow your ice-cold anger freezes this hand I
stand reviled access lost body tremble redirect

attention impossible task you say it reads win you
too I say the death of europe the bone monkey hoes
the graves the homegrown brass idols croak in no key /
stone titans your whoresongs cloudbursts of putrifaction
you lead me back to this inchoate text of exile

von Hollands Grachten biss tief ins Russische
Reich a Ganovenweise sung in Luxembourg anno domini 3
post world war 2 all the way to Ancel in the Bukowina
and still we go at it turba scriptorum tralala trying
to wring something from this long night how not to escape
how to work from inside out that it stand in the light of
day that it make that light light again here comes
exile down the narrowest cut he believes himself & finds
a home therein exile night elixir

Linda Reinfeld

Foundations

Fishes perceive how the seas diminish,
How the harbor stones settle heavy, sink
Solid onto the ocean floor,

And here I am, watching also, but wishing
For a fling in the high mode, like an old poet,
Looking for a theme of my own,

Looking even in ancient places
For a great event—the building of a breakwater, say,
Or the beginnings of a great city to praise. Maybe

This picture, now on view, is my subject: The Rape of the Sabines:
Sebastiano Ricci painted it life-size—soldiers
Victorious, ruddy, aglitter with spears and armor,

Seizing rustic virgins for their beds (three years later
Here they are again, portrayed with their babies): thus Rome
Was founded. Today

If you make the trip out to see The Princely Collections,
The Treasures of the Royal House of Liechtenstein,
You can follow the taped tour, hear the elegant voice explaining

The elegant scene: "Observe the struggle: this rendition
Of men joyfully overcoming the resistance of women
Represents the artist's triumph, the triumph of form over matter,

The founding of western civilization." That's the high mode—
No getting around it—and I find myself here, below,
Betrayed by this ground, looking back, as the tide comes in.

DOUGLAS LOWELL

Two Poems

DESIRE

It has a trailing habit of growth
contained. Intention gathers unknown
companions, thoughts. Logic is
a remedy, and desire fails. Logic fails
and falls to thinking things over.

*

It has a trailing habit of growth
along the lines of a premonition dance.
Faces are masked and in the future.
You dream of a starling and wake up to a mockingbird.
It hasn't happened but in a dream
you can't remember, a warning.
The habit is catching.

*

It has a trailing habit of growth
the dark end lost in a quarry
depth unprobed, other end yet
unproved, malicious scent under
the surface leaking, rose water,
the undergarden seeking out
a ground, the passive master
walking over it, furthers the progress,
under governs it, standing suddenly
beside a figure grown.

*

It has a trailing habit of growth
turned from the stars to probe the ground

for access. Night hides just enough
that hidden shapes show
when the eyes avert. Nature moves
to accord with death, life trailing.
Nature hands us nothing
but shadows taking form
speak Latin at us, lifting imaginary skirts
for possible contact.

FOR MAX

"A certain nobleman went into a far country to
receive for himself a kingdom, and to return."

A man went out
of his mind
to find a kingdom had grown up
about him.

He cried at the distant view
its distance beyond
but not beyond sight.

This is a story to follow
out. Man, a certain
kingdom called noble
and to return.

To return to the story
man went out into
someplace far.

This is the land where killing happens
called a voice,
a kingdom called
a nobleman.

This, called a man, is far
country, receive me, I
receive you. This

is your kingdom, return.
And a light shone
near a pool, said a voice
called somewhere.

II.

Go around
called Max
and I thought he meant boxing.

Fais le tour
make the journey
(it had to be made
made up).

Max went a round
and got lost
for a little while.
Hard to see round corners.

Take the tour
make the turn
go the long way round.

III.

Certain of what? There are men
who hold nothing in their hands
and make it a gift. To receive
is to know what to hold on to. Max knew.
Angels passed him a gift on the way.
Certain man, he took it.
And to return?

IV.

A man went out
on an April day
two cold legs
and an apple tart.

A man upset a cart
and the stars fell
into the ocean.
Out of the sea climbed me—
who am I?

This is the origin of man.

V.

For himself a kingdom meant
anywhere but here. That is a lie
told me so I could tell it
from the truth, the matter
of another world. Who could tell
its meaning? Mars went black
and sank out of the clouds
to claim his kingdom. Trust
had nothing to do with it, this
was a matter of man in action.
Trust to the stars is a kingdom
to be claimed, another country
far from me, and Max

VI.

went. I stayed. Who was here
to tell it. Not me. Once we knew
the country we could return without.
Within was kingdom, certain man
went out and in, as always.
But to return. The train went one way
and I another. That was the story told

a man then, now the story goes away
from kingdom into country into
man again.

JULIO ORTEGA

Toledan Self-Portrait

(Tr. from the Spanish by Clayton Eshleman)

To be this shadow of
El Greco, these eyes, these
lips, this illusion that death
ceases in the tranquility of blackness,
free of the light corroding
the idea of the eternal: how golden it is,
this decayable material
perpetuating us.

I am not
this shadow, I am this El Grecan
shaft of light, this nostalgia
for the idea of the eternal
liberated by death, these pale ochres
burning in the gaze that sustains the ultimate
impassioned order of the world.

To be that
tremor of his hand, that
tentative line in the turbulent
sky, as if our body were
the ignorance of time,
the journey that converts
madness into a model of reason
in the name of faith,
this hardly human business
that keeps the powers preoccupied,
delineated by the rite of the miracle,
taciturn body, pure grief of
the incredulous world.

Neither are you
this river nor this stone
flaming like time's taper: monument of desire
suspended in the abyss of its own

construction, while the noblemen
having offered their lives quake
with eternity. What being
but this paradox,
what a mockery, that amazement.

You are not
dust or nothingness: you are the watchfulness
kindling the eyes of El Greco
over his own tomb
opened for whoever glances
below the sole miracle: no longer being
here, only being someone capable of sight,
seeing the hand that presides
over its sepulchre, like the unique power
of the open eye over the closed.

We are
so much exaltation, so much tortured
blue, and this turbulent
grey: confrontation between
the body and its treasure
each to the other vulnerable, creatures
of flesh and of inquiry,
on the abandoned stage
where we awaken alone.

We are no
longer this discourse, we are its contradiction:
the emblems hush and the only words are
those which carry us
to paradise: alone among the ruins,
obsessed with ritual,
we are naked in prayer as
in death: only the body is left
as if it were the last shape
of the lost discourse.

Many towers,
high walls, they say too much
and tell us too little:
their history is not their crumbling,
it is their prophecy,

they resist like an El Greco canvas
all that is human under the heavens.
You are, under such heavens,
at last not merely history
[this tourist guide
chattering in English],
you are the fulfilling promise
that time through your hands
in the form of a sudden star
yet again conquers stone.

You are
this Arabic vault, this steel
inscribing Mudejar stone,
this spreading tree of origins:
the architecture glowing
in the Baroque eye of the Indian
who awakens you
like the disputed miracle of those men
who search outside of time, in meaning.

And the kings
descend to their tombs
in the name of eternity:
tourists take snapshots of the metaphoric
stone contributing another
image of the fleeting—but you
in the name of history
will touch again the traces of the empire
the artisans entomb under their writing:
doors, vaults, arches,
the massive sepulchre time requires.
Add to the line
this passion for sketching.

And art
is the form of the fleeting: its miracle
is not to resist, is having
given to passionate themes
a sense of design that time incarnates
in the founded and the foundering.
To touch this plateresque ash
is to see the milling plaza

celebrating the loftiness of worked
stone: crowds touch
the very water, this image
where irretrievable time
is depicted, this vibration.

I know more about me
in this river or that stone,
know more about you, being or not being,
seeing the nobleman's face
or the artisan's hand, the painter's
stroke or the master's signs, inscribed
in this image of the world
miscarried like all worlds,
while I sustain my brief one
and yours, in this abyss of eternity,
where time concedes to me
its engraved stammering:
be you who you may I am this
drawing watching the stone
transformed into the spoliation
of the mirage.

A Tribute to Porfirio DiDonna (1942-1986)

Testimonials by Friends & Reproductions of DiDonna's Work

(Edited by John Yau)

PORFIRIO DIDONNA IN HIS STUDIO
Photo Credit: D. James Dee

NOTES OF A TELEPHONE CONVERSATION WITH PORFIRIO'S MOTHER
SATURDAY, 24 JANUARY 87

Porfirio said to his mother while an art student at Pratt, "I want to be a religious painter." Art teachers disapproved of religious subject paintings when he brought them in.

Porfirio's mother said, "He was always drawing horses and elephants as a child."

Porfirio's Church: The Church of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, located at the corner of Verona St. and Richard St., Red Hook, Brooklyn. The Church of Porfirio's first Holy Communion, Confirmation, where he was an altar boy. The Church where Porfirio volunteered to play the organ when in his middle twenties. The Church that celebrated the Mass of Resurrection before his burial.

Porfirio pitched a no hitter when he was sixteen. The team was sponsored by a newspaper.

Porfirio's father was a longshoreman—"winchman." He operated the loading and unloading crane of the ships. She also said that there had been for several generations art and music on her side of the family, none on his.

Porfirio's mother, speaking of Porfirio's death: "I dressed him beautiful and then just put him away." She said she could refer to his death only in those words.

—Anton van Dalen

Not one of Rilke's "early departed"—Vera
Knoop who stopped dancing & died of glandular disease at 15—
Porfirio's big mellow is it lemur eyes?
A soft, pure man, with an exact imprint,
and—out of brutal Red Hook, as if he were the antithesis of
violence & death,

dead, and so young, just into the foothills of what I
remaining
imagine as mountainous climb,
but as in the case of Wallace Berman, cut off at 49,
the imprint is so specific we should not
mourn incompletion, for the creative fusion
—to align one's life & one's work—
is microcosmically cogent. All else
second bud, third bud etc.,

first bud
DiDonna
whole

—Clayton Eshleman

AN EXCERPT FROM THE MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR PORFIRIO DIDONNA

"Pro was a dear friend of mine. Pro always fascinated me because he was a man with a unique vision of life. A unique thinker. But above all, he captured my fascination because he was such an extraordinary artist.

I thought of him as a reincarnation of a Chinese master painter of the 11th Century, my favorite period, who believed and lived in the purest pursuit of his art. That's Pro. In fact, I told him this one night during one of the walk-and-talk sessions when Pro and I would wander around TriBeca, sometimes until 2 or 3 in the morning. I told him that he reminded me of this Zen monk who meditated for a long time before painting, but once he held a brush, he painted with such swiftness and sureness that with a few brushstrokes he was able to put down a whole universe onto that piece of white paper.

Then Pro said, "But Naoto, do you really think I am like that?" I said, "Yes." Then after a little pause, he said, "You know—you are right. I am like that monk!" He was so pleased he was dancing on the street like a child.

Pro gave me so much, I can't begin to evaluate how much he has given me. How fortunate I am to have had a friendship with such a great painter. I love him and will always revere him."

—Naoto Nakagawa

The most strong and lasting impression I have of Porfirio is of the first time I visited him at home. I had already known him for some time, but he was rather reticent to have people over, probably for reasons of privacy and shyness. It was an enormous space, having the qualities of cavern and cathedral, but faded, flaking. There was little attempt at decoration or comfort, everything being related to or at the service of making paintings. In this space the paintings were like windows, stained glass, bright and radiant accents of color and gesture. The way he introduced each piece was almost fretful, alternately proud and disappointed, exceedingly doubtful. Each time that I would say that I liked this or that painting he would seem to be astonished. It was in those surroundings that I first felt the religious aspect of Porfirio's work. Although not specifically involved with religious subject matter, they had a kind of light and iconography that I associate with the costume and decoration of churches. When I recently saw an early painting depicting the last supper this impression was confirmed.

In the times I spent talking to Porfirio, whatever we were discussing, it would always come back to the work. That was what he tested everything against and through. He was never pompous or arrogant, so the discussions were never involved with power plays or self-righteousness. We could be entirely comfortable and know that we would listen and respond without guile. Pro also had no hierarchy about what was or was not interesting to think about, so it seemed that everything was full of potential. That quality was also part of his charm; it would expand the world again. Clearly, Porfirio was involved in his work in a deeply spiritual way. Were he to read that now, I'm sure he would laugh and make some crack. Secretly pleased, perhaps, but not taking it too seriously. That was another quality of Pro's that made him so accessible—a boundless capacity for seeing the humor in himself and others—a kind of common sense that made him seem unshakable.

I miss him alot both as an artist and as a friend, but when I do think of him there is a comfort in the memory because the fabric of his life and work made sense to me. Porfirio was a highly unusual and original artist, and a fine human being.

—Medrie MacPhee

A GLIMPSE OF PRO

He sat on the stonewall telling me about his weightlifting workouts. He was shirtless, and his skin was milk white and palely freckled—the pallor of a Northern Italian and a city boy. He spoke earnestly as he usually did no matter how trivial the subject. Sincere is not too strong a word. He was always sincere, had no airs nor pretense about him. In a year it didn't mean a damn thing what workout regimen he was following. Porfirio DiDonna was to suffer and die from a brain tumor. Surely, it was already a bud in his brain on that July 4th afternoon.

We sat in Nina Nielsen's (She runs a gallery in Boston where I came to know Pro and his work and is today, as she has been for some time, Pro's champion) backyard waiting for the picnic to begin, having just finished playing softball. We were on the same team. Pro had made a great over-the-shoulder catch in deep center avoiding the boulders and keeping his feet among the hummocks of pasture grass. It is cruel to remember him vital and aglow that day, but impossible not to. His illness and death so soon followed this afternoon they drew a tight and grim knot of irony. Practically a definition of irony.

Pro (What an inappropriate nickname for the man!) was an innocent. He seemed not to have been marked, marred, by what William Blake called Experience. Pro never followed the "starry pole" of reason and materialism, but lived the life of the imagination. I have no right to say never. I didn't know Pro that well. I am sure he worried about his future and was sometimes sad and lonely. But this is the man and artist I saw in the too few glimpses I had of him.

And you can get a glimpse of his character in his work. Remembering him today I see again the drawings he showed at the Nielsen Gallery two years ago. Black marks on buff paper. Dots and lines arranged in rectangles. Some of these marks shadowed in white. And some with a gray wash as if blurred by rain. Serene, untroubled and untempted by

the world even as they seemed to add things up, to total experience. It was easy to look at these works and feel both at rest and free.

—William Corbett

FOR PRO

Honest paintings are neither for or against the world. Honest paintings quite simply are and in that areness, loved or not will always be. Pro's paintings will always be, for Pro was not just an artist, though a fine artist he was, Pro was a painter, an honest painter. Pro's life, the core of his being, centered around painting, and for those who love painting, the art of painting, he left us many fine and beautiful things. Pro, the man, was the most unique person I ever knew or will ever know. He was like an exotic bird and yet humble like a monk born holy in an unholy world. Pro's work is finished, and it is now for the world to do with it what it will. As for me, I will always be transported by it. Transported to a special place. Pro's special place. It is much too early and I lack the command of words to say what effect this wonderful dear man's life and his passing will have on my life. All I know now is that I miss him and that I loved him, and that his spirit will always be with me—he was my friend.

—Jake Berthot

Porfirio DiDonna was as pure a painter as I have ever known. He got to the center of his internal workings and forthrightly elicited what he sensed, what was. The act of finding something inside himself was finding something inside the painting, not on, but in and in further to what was found, which went elsewhere, causing a renewal of the process. He was a craftsman; the mode of working, the materials, exotic by today's standards, the preparation was paramount, yet concurrent to thinking. The process was thinking, an internal conversation with himself and the phenomena of painting.

Color was a universe that Porfirio lived in. Color was a celebration. It brought him joy and because he developed it structurally, I believe it brought him solace, for his life, as all lives, was at times difficult. With color, lines, marks, textures, drawing to and from and out of a feeling for a form or image, he made elusive yet fertile images which in feeling, in their metaphysics, spanned from Naples, Italy to New York to heaven.

In my mind he made some of the best drawings of his time. It was an exhilarating, nearly shocking, experience visiting his studio, that well-lighted dark cavern, the walls covered with drawings. In them one witnessed the dialogue that traced his thinking, the progressions, the turnabouts, on a scale that brought to mind what an editor or a scientist must track, reviewing raw material, organizing, recognizing where it might go, hoping it might, knowing some control, watching a dynamic collection of material both compounding its meanings and releasing them.

Recalling those paintings, especially the late ones, I recognize his art coalescing; the inner self, the visible world around him, the language and act of painting became indivisible. There were two significant sets of compositions, one an architectonic earth mother torso, or perhaps it was an hourglass form, that quavered softly with anxiety. The very last were abstractions of church-like windows, quiet and upward pulling. The canvas is the window, the viewer could be looking in or looking out. These works are robust in implications and are beautiful in a way that could never be analyzed to an end point, beyond beauty. How such a humble man, decent, even sweet, could make paintings so complex in their secret mirrorings of himself, yet totemically grand and elusively expressive in symbolic imagery is difficult to know. I got close to knowing for I knew him well, he was true, he remains a model to follow, I miss him.

—David True

I recall a quiet, intensely involved young Porfirio who came to my drawing class at Columbia University in the mid-sixties. One day he entered the studio carrying large rolls of heavy wrapping paper that almost dwarfed his figure. He explained that he had done them in his room at

home and was anxious to see what had come out. When he was working the drawing, it was in large sections on the floor, up on the bed and then up the wall, which made it impossible for him to see what truly occurred. But in this case, more was more. The images were complex ones: the quality of drawing, the degree of imagination, was impressive. At the end of that year he became a graduate student, and had his own studio. The two of us met each week, and it became clear that Porfirio was an insular man. I was certain that inside this need for privacy was a lode of sensibility, and a gift that he could draw on for his work. He had an acute sense of scale. Both in very large works that went from the inside of his door to the window at the other end of the room and in the smaller paintings (which were never minor works) there was a formal order that did not allow for slightness.

After Porfirio left Columbia, I continued to see his work. For all the shifts in form, from the small dots of color to the more open rich use of paint, the connective was a particular quality of light. It is hard to think of this without seeing the work as having the quality of religious thought, a passion. It is an inner light that informs the work. An iconic figuration that appears in the early works of his late teens, and in his early twenties as an undergraduate at Pratt. While working with Porfirio at Columbia his paintings had their own identity. Only in the literal sense was he a student. What he may have learned was through the act of making paintings, not studies, not exercises.

Porfirio's family and friends always referred to him as "Pro." I always knew him as "Porfirio" and didn't see him regularly until the last several years. Those last times were particularly good. The talk was rarely about anything other than painting. I never knew him to indulge in petty gossip about the art world.

One day after lunch, we were walking down Canal Street. He mentioned being somewhat at a loss in comprehending a mutual friend, a splendid painter, who confided to Porfirio that at times while painting thought of himself as God. He asked me if I ever felt that way, adding that he never did, and what did I think? My quick, honest reply was that our friend was lucky, and that I envied him. Porfirio had a modesty that was linked with a deep faith in the validity, the spirit of a work of art.

Last year I got to know Porfirio's parents and to visit the church he attended since childhood, where he occasionally played the organ. Here is where he saw what was probably his first painting: a large altar-piece influenced by the High Renaissance. In its subject relating to the life of Christ, one may find a connection with Porfirio's work.

For at least two decades my feelings for Porfirio have centered on a strong sense of respect for him as an artist. When he became ill I felt a deep affection, and an apprehension of impending loss. In the most true

sense, he was a religious man whose faith centered on creating a formal order that is lit with a mysterious quality of life. So then, we are in debt to Porfirio. It is a profound one, and one for which we are grateful.

—Stephen Greene

In my address book, above Porfirio's address and phone number, I have listed the address and phone number of his parents. It's the only such example in my book.

To come to New York many of us have removed ourselves at great distance from our families. The art world, at its best, becomes another kind of family. We can take care, a little, of each other. Porfirio was the exception. His family was in Brooklyn, and we could all see how close he remained to them, and how much strength they gave him.

Some twelve years ago, when my son was about five years old, Pro invited us to his family's house for Thanksgiving. I remember the steaming good food, looking down the long table surrounded by Pro's family and art world friends. The rooms were filled with his early paintings.

At the memorial, Pro's mother, despite her grief, remembered me, and asked about my son.

—David Reed

DIDONNA

The paintings, drawings and water colors of Porfirio DiDonna are romantic in the traditional sense. They are comparable in their pervasive moodiness and in their heightened sense of imagination to Delacroix or Corot.

In an essay, Baudelaire describes a type of draughtsmanship which is, "the noblest and strangest, it can afford to neglect nature," and "it

realizes *another* nature analogous to the mind and temperament of the artist." Though we are no longer in a time when rendering nature is an issue, this statement had a lot of meaning with respect to Porfirio's work. The tower-like shapes that appear in the work are not from nature, but from imagination, and the other shapes he uses, whether they be polyhedrons or the empty spaces left by shapes that were there, are really not identifiable. "A belated attempt has now been made to trace back the forms of architecture to the leafy branches of the forest and the rocks of the grotto, and yet these forms are nowhere to be found in nature, but rather in the soul of man." Even the little flecks of color do not become leaves, or any other things in nature. They are a manifestation of the artist's temperament, and are man-made.

DiDonna creates a "super-natural" space in his paintings that is descriptive of the place art occupies in human experience. But it is not a purified vision of reality. It comes from understanding complexity and multiplicity and, therefore, is not abstract in the sense of being idealized or removed. Because there begins to be a particular association that transforms shape and paint, the work has mystery and gives the impression of continuously becoming. Though the paintings are superbly done, glazed with "old master" surfaces, they have a quality of being unedited, of having everything in them in a uniquely open way.

—Lee Sherry, 1983

REMEMBERING PORFIRIO

He sounded sleepy when he answered the phone, so I asked him if anything was wrong.

"I can't paint," he whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"I can't paint because the stretchers I ordered aren't ready yet. They were supposed to be delivered last week, but they won't be ready for another two weeks. When I can't paint, I can't do anything."

As always, at the end of one of our phone conversations, he thanked me for calling him.

He was walking down Broadway toward Canal Street. I asked him what he was up to, because the minute I saw him I realized our paths had crossed only once before, even though we lived just a few blocks

apart. Pro organized his life around specific routines, such as going to the gym to lift weights and swim, going to a bar near his loft to play pool and eat dinner, or going to his parents' house on Sunday. When I saw him, I knew that he had broken his routine.

"I saw the Van Gogh show this morning and was knocked out by it."

(The show was at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, some 85 blocks north of where we standing.)

"After seeing it, the only thing I could do was walk home. Van Gogh's paintings are like that. They make you think."

He lived alone on the top floor of a narrow building three blocks south of Canal Street. The dark vast loft was divided into living space and studio. You entered the living space first.

The things: a clothes rack—the kind you see being pushed through the garment district—on which hung shirts, pants, and coats, a row of nails from which hung an assortment of hats, bureau, tables made of plywood sheets balanced on saw horses, piles of drawings and watercolors, boxes of charcoal sticks, brushes, watercolors, jars and cans filled with change, desk, filing cabinet, radio, portable television, neatly-made bed, and a couch on which was always a book he was in the middle of reading.

Above the bed a row of small paintings—their colors murky and moody—that he had done in high school and college. The subjects: Madonna and Child, Crucifixion, Deposition, and Resurrection.

Whenever I told him I wanted to see what he was working on, he said I should come over tomorrow or the day after at 1:00 p.m. We would sit in the kitchen and have lunch. Salami or ham. Mustard. Italian bread. Beer, orange juice, or water. Coffee. The kitchen was an alcove formed by the walls of the studio and bathroom. At the far end was a large, battered restaurant stove on which he boiled water for the coffee—the only thing I ever saw him cook. As we ate and talked, one of his cats would jump up on the stove and sit in a large pot and watch us. After lunch was over and everything put away, we would go into his studio, followed by one or both cats.

We sat in his studio for most of the afternoon, talking about the paintings he was working on, the rows of drawings tacked to the wall. I said: "I bet you got things in here that I've never seen." He smiled, got up from his chair, walked over to a table, and, after a minute or so, found what he was looking for—a large white folder. One by one, he

carefully removed a woodcut done in black ink on thin translucent paper. An hourglass-like shape surrounded by bars placed at regular intervals.

"How long have you been working on these?"

"A year maybe two. I wanted to learn how to do them. I got some books, I studied."

"How do you feel about these?"

"They're okay."

I asked him what he thought of a show by a painter he had taught the technique of glazing with black oil to.

"I'm not sure I understand what he's getting at."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the work isn't clear enough. I'm not sure why he made the decisions he made."

I was in his loft, looking at an early painting by another artist.

"When did you get that one?"

"Oh, I traded for it years ago. I like trading work. If you would like to, we can trade something."

"Well, okay but..."

"What's the difference? A trade is a trade," he said, smiling.

I invited Pro and a few other friends over for dinner. At some point, each of us talked about when we had moved to New York. He grew up in Brooklyn and lived with his parents until he was in his early 30s. He had a loft in Manhattan which he went to every day, but he always went home at night. He could work in the loft, but it was illegal to live there. During a prolonged subway strike, he couldn't travel back and forth, and decided it would be better if he found a place in which to both live and work. He went home almost every Sunday. All of us were invited over to his parents' house for dinner. He said his parents would be happy to meet his friends. He said that he didn't feel like he had to move out of his house until the subway strike made it hard for him to work.

Jake Berthot, Edith Gould, Pro and I were invited to lunch at Stephen and Sigrid Green's home, which was one hour north of Manhattan. We go in Edith's pickup truck. A cool sunny day, Pro and I sat in the back. As we crossed the Tappan Zee bridge, he pointed to the struts overhead and said: "I should go out more. I'd probably get a lot more ideas for paintings." Then he laughed. "No, I go out enough. I just have to work more, maybe differently. I mean someday I'll get what I'm after. We believe that, don't we? We believe that we'll get there, someday." Both of us looking at the sky, laughing.

He was taken to the hospital the night before Thanksgiving, 1985. Two days later, the doctors removed a large tumor from his head. Lynton Wells, Dan Devine, and I go to see him. Other friends are there and we have to wait.

A group of friends go to the hospital on New Year's Eve. Someone takes a photograph. Pro looks at it, quizzically; "There's something wrong with this. It's not me. I look dead."

Separately, David True and Stuart Diamond tell me the story in a flat voice. Each of them tells me the story several times over the next few days, always in disbelief.

I first saw one of his paintings shortly after I moved to New York in the early 70s. It was a smooth green field punctuated by uniform rows of small, slightly protruding yellow rectangles. Color and surface shifted simultaneously. I remember going back to look at the painting again and again. I wondered about the compulsive man who patiently put this painting together. Around 1979, Lee Sherry first introduced us on a subway going downtown. We didn't talk. Two, maybe three, years passed before I got his phone number from a mutual friend and called him up. I had seen his work in Boston and New York and wanted to see and know more. We saw each other infrequently. I feel that I was just getting to know him. For all his simplicity and directness, I don't feel as if I knew him well.

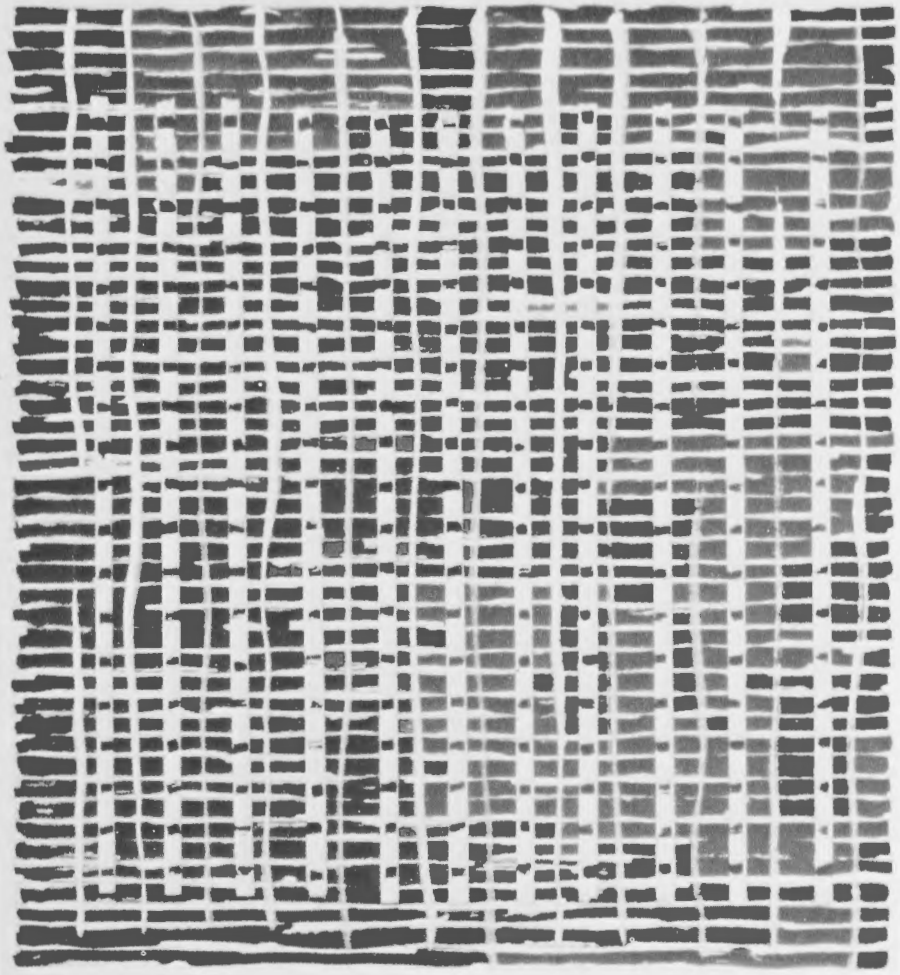
I am waiting for Pro to answer the phone. I know I won't be in New York very often, so I call him, usually in the morning, between 10:00 and 11:00. Visiting hours won't start until noon, and by 10:00 the tests he will undergo will complete. At the end of every conversation, he thanks me for calling.

—John Yau

PORFIRIO DIDONNA

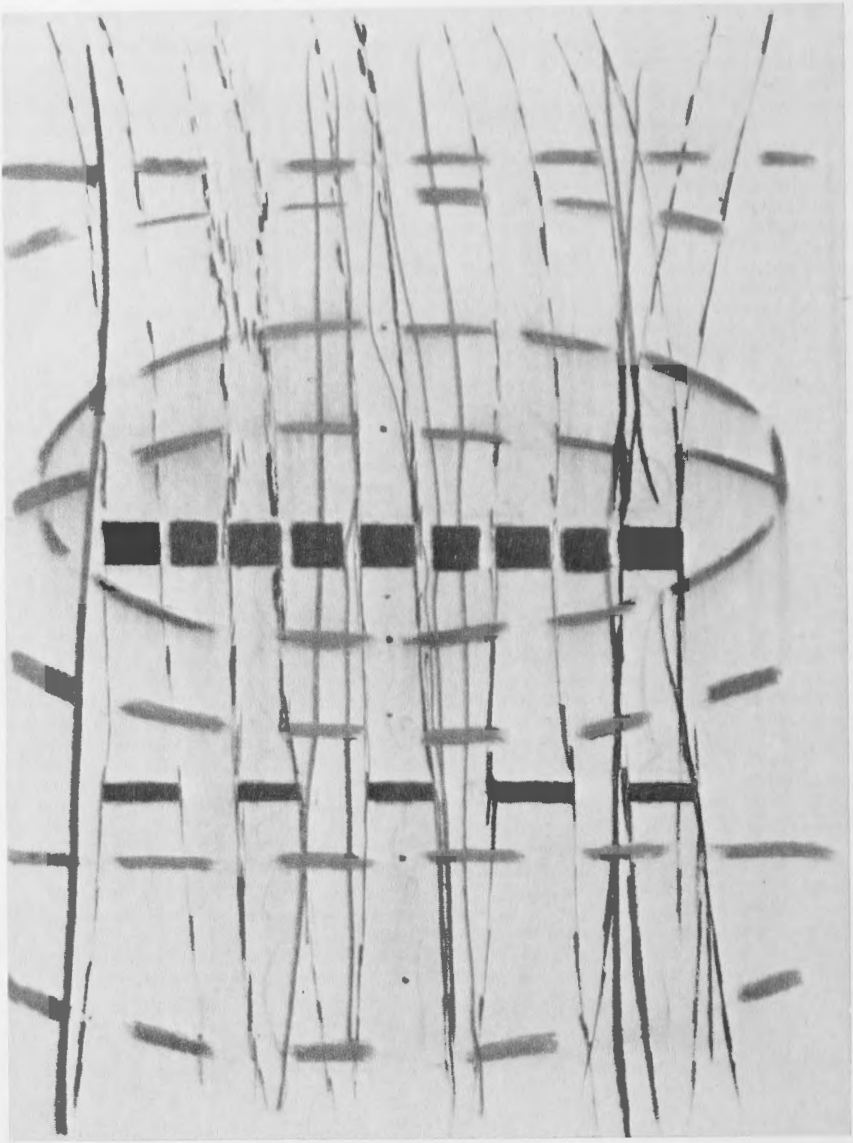
Six Works

CRUCIFIXION, 1964
Oil on Linen, 24" x 20"

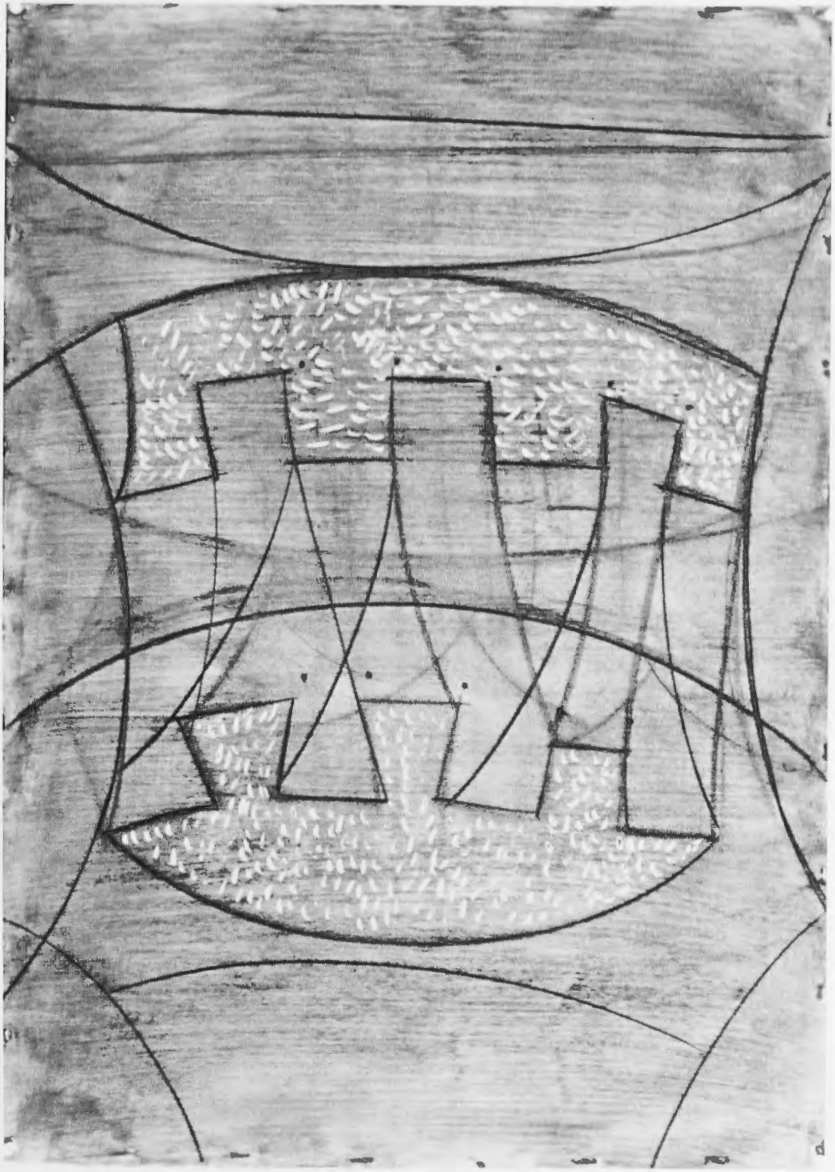


UNTITLED, 1975

Mixed Media on Paper,
22-1/2" x 22-3/8"

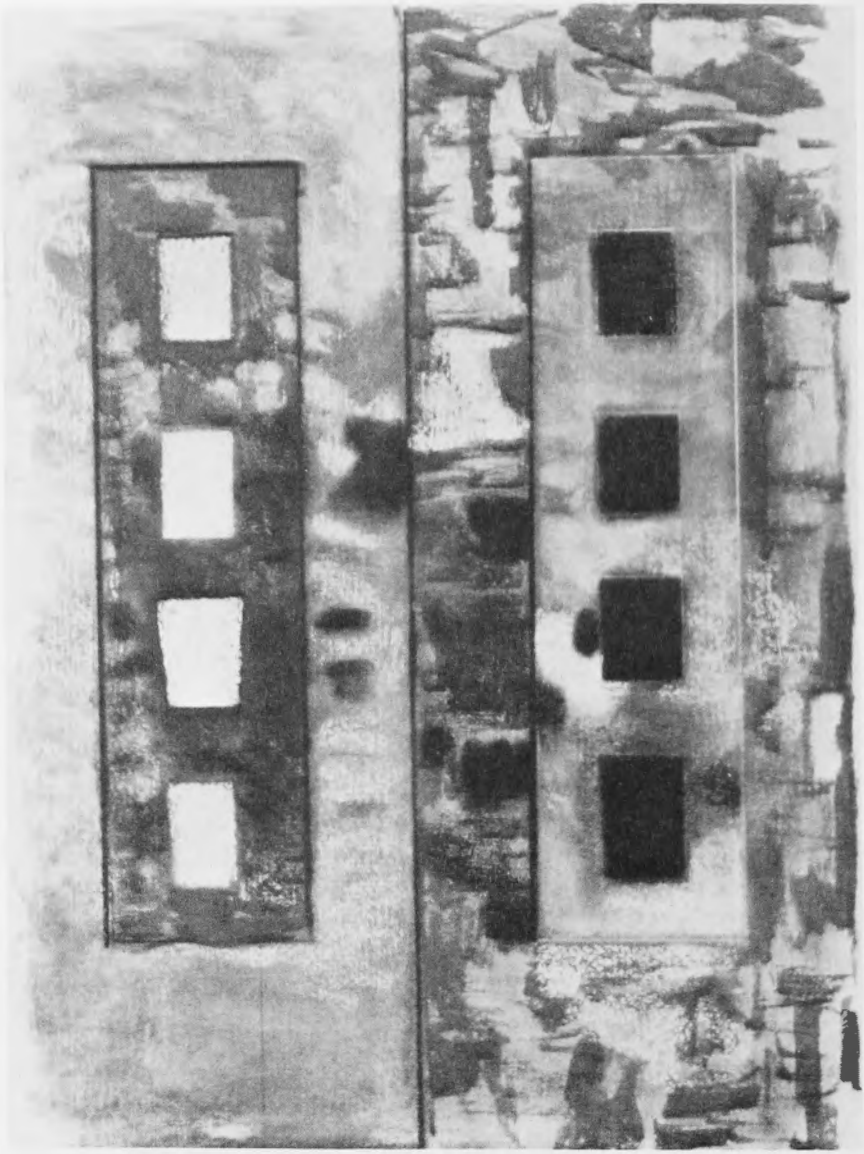


UNTITLED, 1976
Mixed Media on Paper, 30" x 22-1/2"



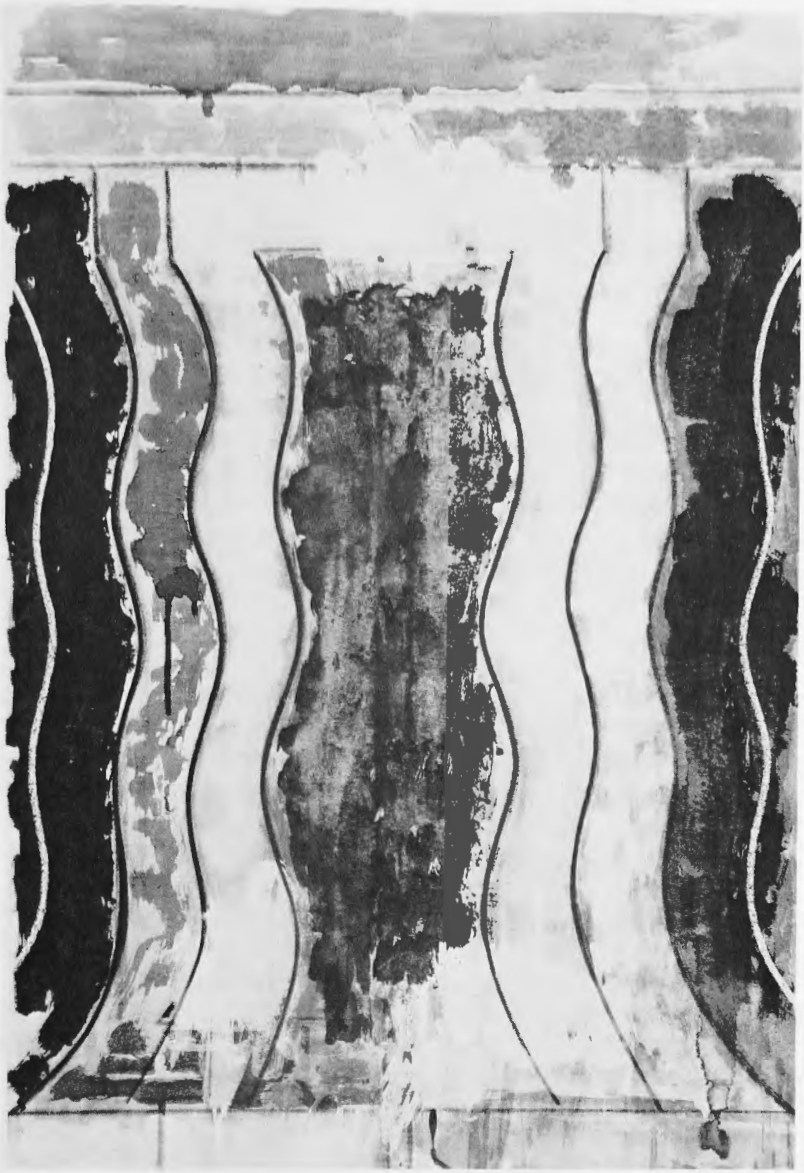
UNTITLED, 1980

Mixed Media on Paper,
41-1/2" x 29-1/2"



UNTITLED, 1983

Mixed Media on Paper,
30-3/8 "x 22-3/4"



UNTITLED, 1984

Mixed Media on Paper,
41-1/2"x27-1/2"

JOHN ASHBERY

Three Poems

DREAMS OF ADULTHOOD

Why does he do it like that say it like that you might ask
Dream it like that over landscapes spotted with cream and vehement
Holes in the ground that have become little lakes, now that the chill and ardor
Of winter are passing into the real thing, where we shall be obliged
To survive? That there is a precise, preordained structure
That has been turned inside out to meet new personal needs
And attract newer bonuses isn't the reply, it's the solution,
Read, the asking, so while this helps, doesn't hinder, its persona
Is off running parallel somewhere: monitorable, but that's about it.

And we see the cries of the innocent how they were coming to help
Us in the storehouse and recruit all that bad knowledge so as to save it
For brighter purposes some day. Alas, these good gestures can't help;
What is needed is a disparate account of the thing happening just now,
To have it sink finally into print, from which there is no escape, no
Never, it all just gets gradually lost for the betterment of humankind.
Think how if there were no toys, we might grow up repeating these encounters
With actual people, and how, much later, seriousness would get destroyed
And incorporated into the record, like sand into concrete.
And the long taffylike ribbon that oozes so perfectly
Telling us much about ourselves and those outside us and like us
Would reach its resting place in the desert sump sooner for that:
The Lake Havasu City of our dreams where London Bridge eyes the sands
Nervously, and vice versa. No, there's no shortcut to being overcharged,
And if one wants to become a diamond eventually it isn't too early
To begin thinking about it, no, to begin thinking about it right now
Before storks are actually to be observed standing on chimneys, cruelly one-legged,

And the tarmac of one season is brought in, brushed off and saved
For any other season: for all consequences to be minded.

My name is Steve she said my name is Brian
My pretty baa-lambs each have names just like everything else upon
earth,
Proper names, I mean. This way we are allowed to recognize species
From itinerant examples of them: "Hi, my name's Joe,"
And one is instantly plugged in to the mountains of possibility
That can only refresh us if we know about how to go about letting them:
In quiet, in dove-gray silence
Where the rescuers' tools are far, far richer than they were before.
Even ghost stories are fairly prevalent, and about to be believed.
Why not, after all, with so much variation,
Such mutability in the recounting of it? Yet soon, of course,
All are bound into a uniform edition, one can't be redeemed
By any of it anymore, only darkness and truth can do that now:
The woods where we used to wander, fumbling for blackcurrants,
The *Johannisbeeren* that nourished that saint in his solitude
And then came to be the food for a whole kind of being that
Still outruns us courteously, we think, what a riot of showmanship
And actual produce reimburses us now, and how we have come to be
Improved by it. You should know never to ask questions, they'll
Slap you mildly on the wrists for it, but meanwhile in your reading
You'll have the sufficient answer for why it came to be this way.
And though one might complain about certain aspects, the long fond
fugue
In which one will come to observe oneself being enveloped, has
answers
For much else besides as it teases us over the hill into eternity
Like the Duke of York's men and then marches us back down the same
Slope with the daisies you are meant to notice. Sure it was pretty
Close back there, I got scared, didn't you? The feeling that something
Enormous, like a huge canvas, is happening without one's having the
Least suspicion, without one single detail of information being
vouchsafed?
How can you live with that, even for a few years or so, they go by so
fast
In patches or clusters, so that on a certain day of reckoning, not *the* one,
Every available jug or receptacle will be seen to be full to overflowing,
Not with anything useful, just the same old stuff of imaginative
Speculation as it was before and still is, unfortunately. These wisps, I
Guess I'll save them for awhile. They need me, don't you think?

FORGOTTEN SEX

They tore down the old movie palaces,
Ripped up streetcar tracks, widened avenues.
Lampposts, curbs with their trees vanished.

They knew, who came after,
A story of departing hands and affairs, that mostly
Went untold, unless someone who was there once
Visited the old neighborhood, and then
They would tell about it, the space
Of an afternoon, how it happened in the afternoon
So that no record, no print of it could exist
For the steep times to come. And sure enough,
Even as the story ended its shadow vanished,
A twice-told tale not to be told again
Unless children one day dig up the past, in the attic
Or under brush in the back yard: "What's this?"
And you have to tell them, will have to tell them then
That the enormous nature of things had a face
Once and feet like any human being, and one day
Broke out of the shell that had always been,
Changed its answer to lies, youthful ambition
To a quirk of the past, a fancy, of some
Antiquarian concern that this damaged day can never
Countenance if we want to live past the rope
Of noon, reach the bald summits by late afternoon.

Surely we are protected, surely someone thinks of us
Often enough to keep the stain from setting, surely
All of us are alike and know each other from earliest
Childhood, for better or for worse: surely we eat
Breakfast each day, and shit, and put the kettle on the stove
With much changing of the subject, much twisting the original
Premise back to the nature of the actual itch
Engulfing us, now. And when we come back
From an outing expect to find the furniture magically
Rearranged to accommodate revised, smaller projects
No one bothers to question, except polite Puss-in-Boots with what
Is in effect a new premise: "Try this one, the dust
Shows less on these rather sad colors; the time
To get started and gain time, however brief, over the neighbors

Quarreling into sunset, once you have convinced them you're
Not playing and therefore not cheating. When the princess
Comes to see you on some perfectly plausible pretext, you'll know
The underground stream that has never stood still is the surface
And the theater for all that is to come. Too bad the revisions
Will never be adopted, but how lucky for you, now,
The change of face. Good times follow bad."

And the locket is still on the chain on a throat.
The askers, the doers, fall into silent confusion
As it comes time to stand up like a sheet of metal
In the blast of sunrise. I will do this, I can do no more.
I cannot think on the edge of a platform.

But the abandonment by love is a de facto sign
Of something else coming along,
Something similar in its measuredness:
Sweetness of things late, a memory for particulars
As lively as though they happened still. As indeed
They do sometimes, though like the transparent bricks
In a particular dream, they cannot always be seen.

SOMEONE YOU HAVE SEEN BEFORE

It was a night for listening to Corelli, Geminiani
Or Manfredini. The tables had been set with beautiful white cloths
And bouquets of flowers. Outside the big glass windows
The rain drilled mercilessly into the rock garden which made light
Of the whole thing. Both business and entertainment waited
With parted lips, because so much new way of being
With one's emotion and keeping track of it at the same time
Had been silently expressed. Even the waiters were happy.

It was an example of how much one can grow lustily
Without fracturing the shell of coziness that surrounds us,
And all things as well. "We spend so much time
Trying to convince ourselves we're happy that we don't recognize

The real thing when it comes along," the Disney official said.
He's got a point, you must admit. If we followed nature
More closely we'd realize that, I mean really getting your face pressed
Into the muck and indecision of it. Then it's as if
We grew out of our happiness, not the other way round, as is
Commonly supposed. We're the characters in its novel
And anybody who doubts that need only look out of the window
Past his or her own reflection, to the bright, patterned,
Timeless unofficial truth hanging around out there,
Waiting for the signal to be galvanized into a crowd scene,
Joyful or threatening, it doesn't matter, so long as we know
It's inside, here with us.

But people do change in life,
As well as in fiction. And what happens then? Is it because we think
nobody's
Listening that one day it comes, the urge to delete yourself,
"Take yourself out," as they say? As though this could matter
Even to the concerned ones who crowd around,
Expressions of lightness and peace on their faces,
In which you play no part perhaps, but even so
Their happiness is for you, it's your birthday, and even
When the balloons and fudge get tangled with extraneous
Good wishes from everywhere, it is, I believe, made to order
For your questioning stance and that impression
Left on the inside of your pleasure by some bivalve
With which you have been identified. Sure,
Nothing is ever perfect enough, but that's part of how it fits
The mixed bag
Of leftover character traits that used to be part of you
Before the change was performed
And all those acquaintances bursting with new vigor and
Humor, as though they wanted to call you down
Into closeness, not for being close, or snug, or whatever,
But because they believe you were made to fit this unique
And valuable situation whose lid is rising, totally
Into the morning-glory-colored future. Remember, don't throw away
The quadrant of unused situations just because they're here:
They may not always be, and you haven't finished looking
Through them all yet. So much that happens happens in small ways
That someone was going to get around to tabulate, and then never did,
Yet it all bespeaks freshness, clarity and an even motor drive
To coax us out of sleep and start us wondering what the new round

Of impressions and salutations is going to leave in its wake
This time. And the form, the precepts, are yours to dispose of as you
will,
As the ocean makes grasses, and in doing so refurbishes a lighthouse
On a distant hill, or else lets the whole picture slip into foam.

DIANE WAKOSKI

Emerald Ice

If I were a jeweler,
I'd look for emeralds the color of
healthy basil leaves, pungent and thick and green
as parrots;
and if I were a woman who had emeralds weighing down
her harpsichordian hands and nudging her neck
as they turn warm but do not melt,
I would hold my emerald-laden hand
against this new snow which covers the not yet frozen
November ground, the liquid hardness of the stones
contrasting with the chalky softness of the snow.
For just a moment at least until,
if I were an astronomer, mirroring an arc of light which
might mean a new galaxy
has been discovered, I might name
this phenomena, "Emerald Ice,"
to tell you how
beautiful these things are to me.
But none of it would
matter, if I didn't dream of boys
with leather aviator jackets,
or men who rode motorcycles into the living room, once,
or the Silver Surfer who might travel with me,
nude of emeralds, a galactic wanderer.
What could matter
if there were any sex or love that could
transcend death,
speed faster than my imagination
or the light?
What could matter
if these boys,
if all men,
were not just memories like emeralds,
or pungent basil,
new snow,
throwing their scuffed leather jackets carelessly

over my empty bed,
while I am surfing,
streaming,
light trailing my heels,
from galaxy to galaxy,
trying to escape death?
What could matter if life
was really about sex
instead of learning
to die?
Isn't orgasm called
"the little death"? Or it that something else?
like eating the best
fresh-leaved pesto on homemade noodles,
drinking an icy, or is it
snowy,
eau de vie? one drop of which glistens
over the basil,
and together they are the only
emerald.

Do women dream
the Saturnian ice of emeralds and sapphires
because men never touch them? They sleep
alone in snowy sheets,
surfing galactic oceans.

We pretend,
but there is no mystery
in either sex or death. Just—
the unthinkable.
The one,
always elusive, never attainable, missing
as soon as you seem to have it.
The other,
always waiting, unavoidable, something
no one escapes.

George Butterick

Two Poems

from *REPARTEE WITH THE MUMMY*

The variety of voices motor in, coming
up the hill. Even if we never get to see them,
even if we stay in bed and throw open our ears
and listen to everything night has to tell us
before sending us into the world with an order
to leave no dream alive to tell the tale.

*

The dream is in the valley,
passing in a caravan;
the dreamers are crouched in the hills
with safeties off.

*

Do you love the language? Do you? Do you
love it when your father calls you a hare-brain or numb-skull,
and your wife a hum-
burger, a hair-trigger, referring to your
sensual epic?

*

Knowledge is the only form embedded in a form.
The embodied content of knowing is formally
bound, not Florida bound.
The impressionable young grass takes a heel. Mud grins.
The consensus makes it possible
to distinguish one who knows from one who doesn't.
That is what constitutes the culture of people.
Rabbits crowd upon the edge of the lawn.
Supper catches like a cube in our throats.
Is nature advancing, is she coming

at or towards us? The sound of nibbling
shakes the foundation of the cottage city with a papery rattle.
Where will the teeth leave off? Teeth? Truth.
Will the consensus arrive in time?
In the nick
of truth?

*

For as long as I can continue to produce proof
like the body nails or hair,
reality is as I say it is. It is permissible
to think of it that way. A pressure on the skin
excludes all that rages outside. Disorder is
a fact accessory to the crime of knowledge.
"Knowledge is. . .founded on the narrative of its own
martyrdom," writes Lyotard.
Armed content patrols ranging up and down the page.
Vast clouds of letters moving coastwise.
An 'h' caught by its serif (its scarf) in the thicket of reading.

Pain weaving through ribs like a fish
through coral, laced tight in a
corset of doubt, mortality hammering
with weighted head, pain flowers in the
garden of the organism, unattended,
prolific, perennial, a flush hand of shades,
blossom of collapse, negative heart,
retracted beat, unchosen alternative
to life, rich in reputation, where it only
melts with more sorrow, of which sleep is a
surrender, viruses are forays, thicket charges,
fell swoops, felonious salts, salutes

*

Mass Grave Discovered in
White House Lawn, a trickle
    of dream drool,
Bones of Hoover's butlers exhumed.

*

She fought in the pin-up brigade, surrendering feature
after feature, until all that is left was one
breast moling its way out of the blouse, blind
to the touch, and omnidirectional.

*

We should be careful to step out of an experience
before it lands.

*

The death god's leg
terminates in a flower.

REPEATEDLY

In the water my body freezes in stages, panels,
like the cuts-of-beef chart in the butcher's.
Imperceptibly the cutting cold suffuses
and I float without caring. This is not a dream.
If I were telling a dream I would have said, "And
drifts beyond the cries on the shore," or some such
melodramatic dip. As it is, I shrug
my eyes in the general direction
of comedy. Comedy on stalks. Now proudly
out of the water, I walk on the beach in my ankles.
The sun blazes a robe of glory on my neck and
back and shoulders. Hair is gone wispy
in the presence of salt. The same salt
dries on our skin like good intentions.
Blond. We all feel blond coming home
from the beach. Which probably means we are
closer than ever to danger.
The sun has no tongue to tell us how red we've gotten,
or the inclination. Its inclination is to join the

horizon. At least no one has tried to master the ocean
the way they do the evening traffic.
The sun disappeared, and I could hear the sound
of water mating, as it does,
repeatedly.

NORMA COLE

Paper House, part two (p-x)

p

page landed immigrant's increments of approach terms of sight
already not made clear
biased choosing a different word captivated without influence
which end of the matchstick to chew on
"when this report account exposé was put before him his face
darkened"
practice derives senses each subsequent thing solid body
eyes square off accidentally magically destroyed not that world
could vanish but that callous immanence ideologically decent
giving form or taking form away from all the instead of
good-night Irene and so on things

q

today the end of the frame
"some time," "some place"
call it paper rose
call it birdland

r

tiles are falling off the fireplace one by one
visual pockets keep from too much understanding bars cursive
substitution years could go by playing in traffic
perfect in that official way insistence habitual reading
star mission polar region corrida
small yellow round new and (possibly) cellophane or acetate
railway brain

folded names instead whimpering out besides having given up
the body to science contagious out in the rain supposedly
separate
saturnine childhood second comes around again before beginning
as if unseen rings and stripes intersect some time some year
say goodbye to things you know groceries at the heart of the whole
humanist tradition veins sticking out things you know

s

every time we. . .
heartily embrace the text
encircle it
shoulder it
shake it loose
if. . .should

t

difficult mine to sing towards blue ribbon slate forehead
crystal night paper bridge
does her house overlook the sea breaks away white brushes
green forgotten grammar made to scale
rectangles came from the Italian boat called what I know
"moving about in worlds not realised"
small yes and no dividers cut in abiding by what ideology
concealed in production sets of gaps
partials letters do not objectify identify or differ
"as if I had found my native land" seasons' letters
letters' seasons templates yet to be

u

partials lit up by the startle reflex
the round art moves strengthening forms
rules the second house where harmony applies

v

to liken to be lost
"pain" becomes "foot"
but the skin
leaving a cause
to experience another
an influence leaves off

w

looking forward out of time we don't have those distinctions
    "our head," "their horse"
the only copy seizing in intensity conscious faint complex
    silence body of an image
all of them each of them revelations of objectivity (a subject)
    gatelessness a roof in the air
influence leaves off variable will form a part held together
    with sutures thorns or pieces
pouring material naked and world-wide temple to temple eyes
    running no excuse to walk on "pressing our heads together"

x

days go by in full
or more natural time

the way bridge is
designation of thought
and thing
cherished, nothing

On the Starn Twins

Excerpted from *Imitation of Life* by Gary Indiana reprinted from the Village Voice.

. . .While standard photographic practice searches for the singular, perfect version of an image, the Starns use every image multiply, in many states.

. . .The use of a single image to engender numerous objects inverts the stigmatized reproducibility inherent in photography, and operates as internal joke, formal device, and querulous theme in the Starns' mirror pictures, where the image merges with its double. *Double Stark Portrait in Swirl* with its dizzying network of tape splices, is a signature work (in a manner of speaking), its fractured surface like a cracked glass, the bedraggled figure doubled as if standing in a waist-high reflecting pool. The Starns are identical twins, and this circumstance has much to do with the soul of their work. Doug and Mike Starn aren't simply collaborative artists, they're as close to being the same person as two persons can be. Their doubleness, and their difference from each other, mirrors the photographic issues their work addresses.

. . .The Starns' work complicates the notion of an original—as, in its way, being an identical twin does. The enlargement and multiplication of details and shadows, the fracture and recomposition of complete images, act as metaphors for a complex psychic equilibrium in which the Other is also oneself, claiming half of a shared ego.

Excerpts reprinted with permission from The Print Collector's Newsletter written by Francine A. Koslow.

. . .Through the Starns' unique process of projecting, taping, cutting, developing, and reassembling segments of the image, Champaigne's *Dead Christ* has metamorphosed into *Stretched Christ.* The resulting 28" x 126" image contains over 75 different segments of photographic paper. The vertical cuts and folds, when meshed with horizontal folds, create a subtle, unifying cruciform composition. The tearing and

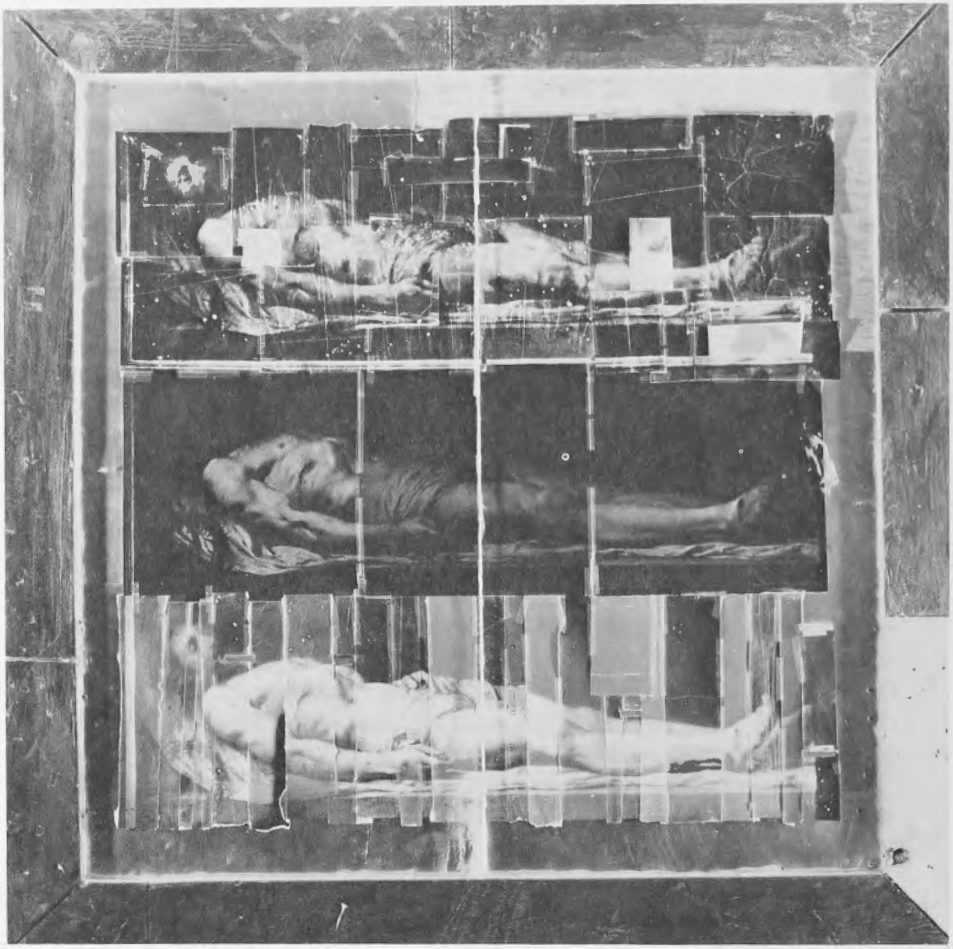
elongation increase the sense of the vulnerability of the dead Christ. *Stretched Christ* now has three, instead of one, gashes in his chest, seven fingers on his left hand, and three puncture holes in his foot. Champaigne's dramatically realistic face of Christ has not been elongated, only segmented below the nose and retaped.

. . .The Starns were not the first collaborative artists to piece together earlier images of the dead Christ. The British team of Gilbert and George created a monumental segmented image after a sculpted crucified Christ in *Tree Jesus* (1980). The segmented blurred image of *Tree Jesus* was created from a geometric grid of cleanly cut rectangles of equal proportion, based on drawn diagrams. Although Gilbert and George's disciplined compositions are far more controlled and architectonic than the Starns' purposely frenzied, cropped, and rearranged photomontages, they share many conceptual concerns as artists. Gilbert and George, who met and formed their artistic collaboration as students in 1967 are, like the Starns, two persons and one artist at the same time. . . .

The Starns are already making a mark in art history—as photographers steeped in the 19th and 20th-century art photography tradition, as makers of neo-Dada montage, and as collaborative artists of the caliber of Gilbert and George or Komar and Melamid. Their faded and sepia-stained studies make intriguing links with the fantastic still-life photographs of pioneer photographer Henri Le Secq and with the private, hazy, religious photographs of fellow Bostonian F. Holland Day. They continue the tradition pioneered by the Dadaist Man Ray of exploiting the photographic process by deliberately adjusting the tonal scale and by edge reversal of image. Although there have been other brother teams in the history of 20th-century art, most notably the Russian Constructivist collaborative team of Georgi and Vladimir Stenberg, creators of intricate collage film posters in the 1920s, as contemporary artists the Starns are a rarity. Besides being twins they have added an ordered confusion to the relationships between art and photography, questioning the relationship between photography and life.

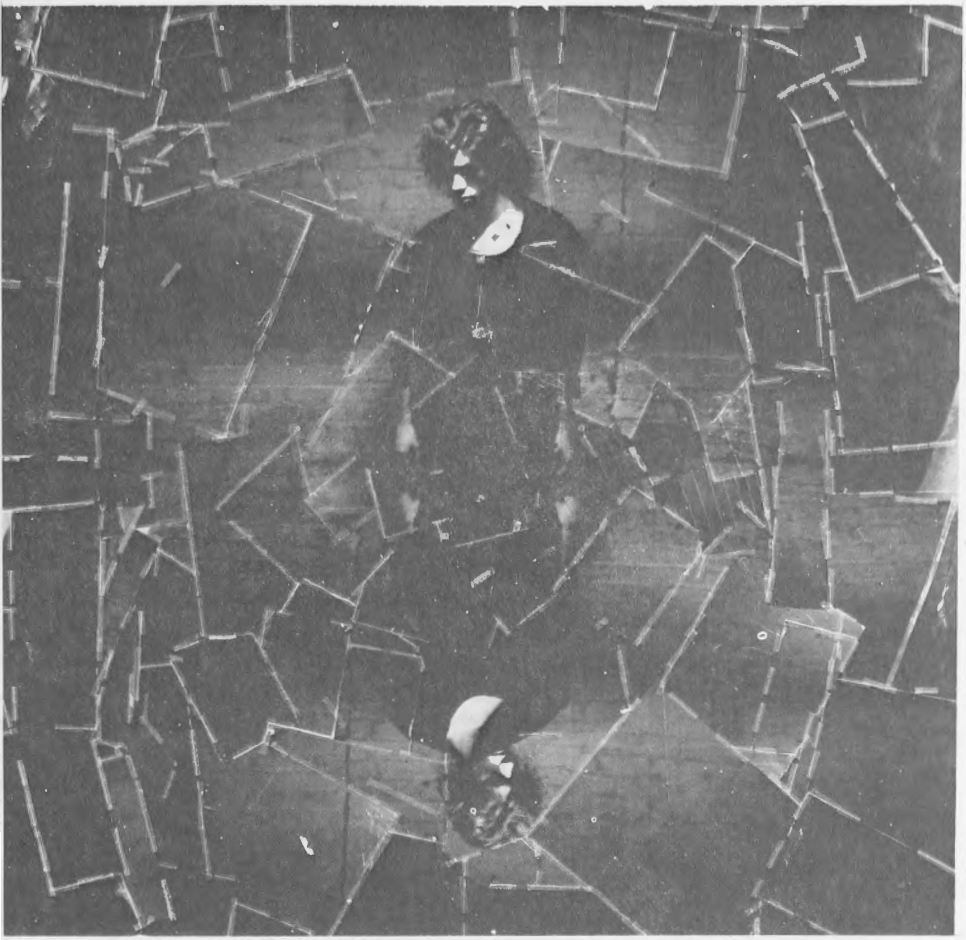
The Starn Twins

Three Works

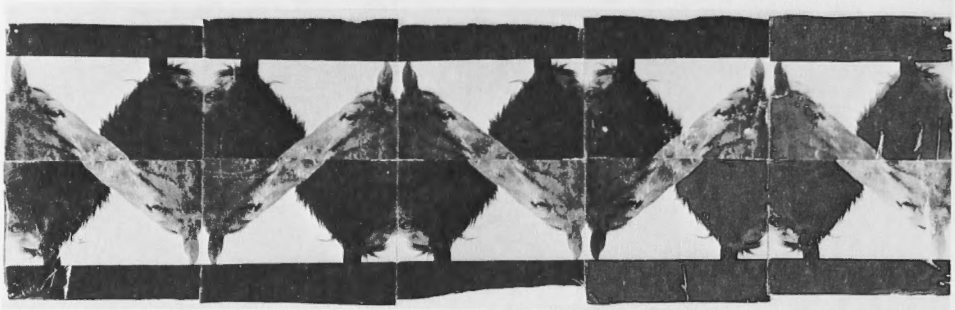


STRETCHED CHRIST, 1986

from the collection of Randolfo Rocha
Tone Silverprint and Scotch Tape, 5' x 5'



DOUBLE STARK PORTRAIT IN SWIRL, 1985
from the collection of Randolfo Rocha
84" x 84"



HORSES I.C.A. EDITION, 1985-86
36" x 118"

SUSAN WHEELER

Two Poems

WHAT MEMORY REVEALS

> On our way there we think of the perdurance
> of overwhelming and arrival.
> —M. Heidegger, *Identity & Difference*

Angels, pulled into light—provoking the air, fall
here. You are served a fallow breakfast;
you must stir your juice. Outside, on Columbus Avenue,
a momentary lunge convenes a trafficked burst.

This is not what was intended when they took you to your first
photo session, swaddled. But intent is a ruinous composite.

There were several years of careful steps across
lower Manhattan. A looming sail in a nightmare.
A poolhall, crisscrossed by rudimentary reliefs.
Mayonnaise in a refrigerator door.

You stepped forward, into light, onto a green lawn dotted with tumblers
and the hum of Minnesota cicadas. Everywhere a firm rejoinder waved.
He whispered the simplest, pettiest of comforts. Your dress alit.

A fat man bends beneath the beaker's proximity.

Freakish, the two that burst into your room where you
were gathering privacy frantically, phonetically.
Burnish (they are flying) regulation (appointments a
calamity of rosewood)—or perhaps they said
furnish the nation. This left a hole, that left a lacking,
and he, the dog, had it, too.

Now Thalia rearranges the glove compartment.
On the right there is a quiet flapping, a whirring
or a wheel joint, in a bright and terrifying night.

It was time that altered monster genes. Pressed to the rear of a
new elevator toward a model apartment, you started with the sail,
with the tremoring that troubles you still. Like the murderer
who only dreamed, you can't shake catastrophe's history.
Your cuff, straightened now, is white against your suit.
The cordialities confirm.

Diving into water his wings conflated. Business
is damage.

What have you pricked, a tourniquet hamstring
under a revolver of lights?

A Lone Ranger replies. There is a waffling like a tournedo
of bundled wings. An egg drops out.

You pay for your breakfast and its litanous menu,
scrambled.
There is earth enough to fill each car,
each open mouth yawning in the light
on Columbus Avenue.

THE MAN WITH THE GREEN CARD

for Marc Giordano

Tenderness becomes its own reflex, like the cradled
cup in the hands, or the random administration of frailty.
They eat grass, bo, bo.
Felicity burns deeper than the merchandise it culls:
a fare bounty and a pygmy's dream.
Sometimes I eat grass, bo, bo.

Forge love: beyond the committee chambers
there lies a green field with buttercups and rodents
romping. Beyond the peculiar chaos of a dog's nails
on a tenement stair the body's ebullience requires ash.

The belt may not be a tautening creek for the land.
Eliciting fire, the keys in his fist, a faucet for indigence—
perfidious hire—they eat grass, in the night, bo, bo,
fastening, fast, like this button that's pearl under flickering.

ARKADII DRAGOMOSHCHENKO

Nasturtium as Reality

(Tr. from the Russian by
Lyn Hejinian and Elena Balashova)

Clad in sweat
you drink cold water from the pitchers.
—V. Khlebnikov

1.

An attempt
at describing an isolated object
determined by anticipation of the resulting whole—
by a glance over someone else's shoulder.

A nasturtium composed
of holes in the rain-spotted window—to itself
it's "in front,"

to me, "behind." Whose property is the gleaming
tremor
of compressed disclosure
in the opening of double-edged prepositions
in
a folded plane
of transparency which strikes the window pane?

2.

Attacked by white, desiccated and exact
(so precise it's as irreducible as ellipsis)
a wall
in the turquoise blue distortion.

To the nasturtiums
the storm left a legacy of limestone and heat

in a purple semi-circle
and steam gleaming in the cloverleaf courtyard.

(A version: this night shattered apart
by the rays of the dragonflies' concise deep blue
drawing noon into a knot of blinding
foam. . .

A version: tonight the rays of the dragonflies
crumbled, by day they sewed together the cattails and the sedge
in the marshes, where the steam is dazzling, like a cobweb
in summer, and—

the total renunciation
of any possible embodiment in reading: neither
a dragonfly, nor that which forms and is
formed
or is washed away
by this awareness—but the clearest forms
need mud. A version.)

As a living fretwork in blown grass
the slanting wind carries silence.
A sound
from without
approaching
that which
the eye has blurred, an unconforming form,
it bares, rushed out 100 times into angles
where the obsessive attempt to outrun silence
persistently encounters the arrogant silence.

3.

The vibrating nasturtium
(immersion
of a bumblebee in the still undrunk confusion of wings)
on

the thread of intentions strengthens the edge
(something is happening to the eyes—
they don't communicate with the brain)
of matter
in the nominative, near verbal fiber
of the flower—
it opens its leaves
mournfully rounded
(the shrieks of the guttural bushes as they fade
transform them into clusters
of autumn tarnish)
in the dusk.
(the knowledge, which belongs to me,
absorbs it cautiously, tying it
to the innumerable capillary nets:
the nasturtium—it is a section of the neuron
string. . .)

Some are eaten through by caterpillars, sun rays, aphids.
A sign sweats over the doorway:
"Voltaire has been killed. Call me immediately."

Damp words chalk.

4.

Do you remember
how the nasturtium
first draws apart from the planetree leaf?

Where the will takes on the meaning of the desire
to rush a hairsbreath from death forward

until the vertebrae crackle in the pentatonic scale
and ants are at one's temples—
like thin-fleeced
salt—
with the dry enlivened ringing
of air fingering every hair

of what
is already a pitcher, water and sweat and planetree leaves,
waterlily, necklace of dust
and blade, showing through,
a gap
and all the rest that might continue

but only memory, opening slightly, jumps
to meet it, untangled by the eyes,
trying so ludicrously to seduce

what

henceforth is only a continuation
within the ends' immense proximity,
hurried persistent speech. The dialogue
is common enough:

You'll say, "Where were you?"
She'll stammer, "I. . . . . ." And right away
you prompt her:
"You were wandering around in the passage between order
and chaos. . ."
"Yes, if you want. . . .Yes."
"So?
What did you bring with you out of the past?
And do you need what you brought now?"
"When?. . .
Where?. . .For myself?"
"Yes. You! For yourself!"
"O, everything that you tell me I'll remember. . . ."
(And the boring dialogue goes on, gradually
becoming noise)
So

the tree I read (what?) went behind a shadow.
And if I could instil my consciousness into its population
of leaves, into the register of sparks and twigs,
in the rumble of its branches, an unrolled papyrus
will,
One would say: The shadow is ready to leave behind
its sources in the branches' tips,
having set for "dying"

the terms of an absurd confession of love.

Impenetrable.

5.

Blades pocked with repetition
(forty seconds spent searching for an analogy
to the upward branching
at the throat of the stem—instead
of this: "the emotions are
a component of composition, and expression,
itself branching out into exclamation,
means as much as
the comma which precedes its appearance")

in radiating veins, like holes inscribed
in living epidermis,
flowing toward a precipice,
not calming the disordered fluctuations,
lie close,

dividing between itself and me
the space that preserves reason,
where questions about value ought to flicker. Arkadii
Trofimovitch Dragomoshchenko describes
a nasturtium, inserts it in his head. The chlorophyl

aligns galaxies of oxygen. The friction of light
against the green mass widens the path of the thing in the net
filtering the heavy rainfall,
another hovers
lazily, signifying at the shivering threshold
knowledge of wide losses, a gap that runs
into the cracks
whose bi-valved power, like a melted pattern,
a grapevine. . .

having passed with strange mumbling
into a new space begetting something else
from the immutable.
A.T.D., speak the rhetoric of accumulation
and affirmation: are they the same swifts (of three years
ago)
like molecules of darkness, which will weave the theme
of evening for the stars again,
dropping a muscular line into the crowning bay?

That nightly subsidence into the green and lore
in silt
the mercy of soils. . .

The nasturtium and anticipation rainy as the window and wind-
ow behind wind-
ow
(he in it, it in him)
like meanings smashing each other
(I don't say, metaphor. . .)
drawn
by emptiness,
one of the distinct details—
straight,
thin,
line pulled across the tree,
mouth,

the shadow its weathervane, sorting the horizontals
of decision,
thought,

6.

) without time to be born, dressed briefly
in speech)
forming rows of luminescence in aggravated
matter (

into its opposite
spattering number, genus
on the different sides like narrow glass beads from ecstatically
torn thread,

Just as, without time to evaporate,
a water drop is thrown off the scalding stove.
The turn of the head is dictated by the necessity
of comprehending the trajectory
of a feathered body whose mass is squeezed
into the corridors of vision's gravity,
cutting
its inverse perspective
into the thicknesses of prolix equilibriums. The mechanism
of the keys, extracting sound, hovering over
its description
in the ear,

protracted with reverberation into the now. When? Where?
Me? Vertigo conceives
"things."
And its outlines are unalterable, in order to cut off
the decrees, the frame, its verticals serve as examples
of how the palpable enters reason—
transsense returns with the conclusion that it has absorbed
and dissolved into pure plasma each day:

the nasturtium, unusually simple (empty)
at the first line (from either end)
of equilibrium's position.
A parenthesis, which one doesn't want to close.

7.

On the yellowish blue the white is violet. The pores drink
the limestone's heat
and semi-circles of sun rust in the grass.
Only

through another
(multiplication tables, game boards, needles, a logarithmic
bird, cabbage butterflies wandering in the gardens, the valence
of days, nature. . .little word figures through the formulae
of dragonflies
and attics,
where Saint-John's-wort dozes, and slightly honeyed wood dust
pours from the sweltering ceiling beams,
where sun-filled wasps are wakeful, and where, tossing the skirt
on the broken bureau
with wood dust in her hair,
a neighbor girl, spreading her legs,
puts your hand where it is hottest
and the hand learns all that it always saw
through
multiplication tables, logarithmic bird, through
the stars of her mouth. . .)

—and the point isn't which kind. . .

there's another kind of modelling made by the tongue's saliva
under the dark lamp of the throat
As if going backward in intentional ignorance it should happen
that a time occurs, worthless even for nonexistence,

and bends the bones into an arc
simultaneously carving
the lips into a strange smirk,
a wave.
And the air

chases your gaze along the curvature of the earth,
which from the window is scattered with grass, hieroglyph
flowing
in the rapids
of a finished spring on the brink of an over-full moon
the one that for us "having reached fullness"
stopped the blood in the solar cycle
having almost touched with its fingertips
(not having quite reached)
summer's zones,
like a water drop reflected by heat. . .

and as if in fear was reluctant to evaporate. . . . . .

8.

Where the will takes on the meaning of the desire
to lean on the hair of the breeze.

There were eight of you at her bed.
She had to begin counting: the first or ninth

in the stench of disintegrating cells (childhood terror!—
pushing fangs of vomit at the sight of the waxy gloss
approaching the sweet mask whose mouth flows out of the ears
and the candle scent in the fumes of memories of one
who like a log stripped of bark is spread out
in lush loam!)

and
in the rotting of sweet connections–uterus of a young moon—
are accustomed to the divisions of time.
And only the others' glance
blindly holds the plasma. . .

But you write that "waiting," "discontinuity,"
losing sense and substance, like a third color
wove her
into its own pattern, a work accomplished free
of knots,
and all the more unbearable the meaning of "her" ripened in you
while the quiet work went on revealing
thoughts
(you, her) from the sheath of feminine pain
the silent symmetry crumbling in the immense proximity
of the end.
And the tree grew dark in front of you, and the guiding wind
led the white grass, confusing its names. . .

And here, in the forty-first of life,
a pampered fool of the cold clouds
leads his brain with his eyes around the circle of moths, and obsessed
with who knows what fantasies
testing the fingers'
craft
I contemplated the truth behind events listening to the vividness
of the erased words
ready to expound on the defects of precision, as

"all that you see over another's shoulder

already—you are
and another's shoulder again;
powerless to continue anything
into knowledge, dividing into a single. . ."

"Grammar book—landscape" through the X of comparison
a substitute nasturtium
flickers. It creeps behind the windowsill.
Somewhat cold.

Shimmering slightly.

Sunset.

9.

Lightning (on craftiness of touch)—ring
of nature—
will split open some prior ocean,
the mollusk of the brain and water, outstretched
on both sides,
the latter left
finished for a long time

so that in the future it might creep with linked twinkling
static
or spawning squeak diagonally across the room
which by heart the fire grooves.
Don't even let yourself
smoke in bed.
On the water
where surviving the cells' mutation
in dividing mirrors, in the play of this and that
in the rustling reverse side of amino acids (it seems, in fact,
this is where the division into male and female occurs
in the mollusk of the brain and on the ripple—wind's manuscript)

a figure will be glimpsed
as a consequence (a few fluctuations of its contours
miss the membrane of the throat!)
in flapping folds
stepping barefoot on the ripple's indifferent letter
which tickles the sole. The fish
can expect to be divided into five,

the bread—into starvation, one. The grapes—to grow

in gaping possibilities of the metaphor of blood.

10.

And here in the 41st of life
A pampered fool, whose speech continually
misses the point,

Obsessed

by the thought of putting my fingers to crafts of crime,
which from various sides have occupied the horizons'
ends,
pecking through the window's shell,

I follow from burst to burst, from explosion to explosion,
the faces, like magnesium petals floating by,
which permit those who remain a misprint in the memory
to be recognized.

Torn by someone's hand, the microwreath of sweet-scented stock
descends and clings
like a magnetic-green moth to the elbow's bend.
The door is banging on the whitewashed balcony: where are you now?
The grimace of time. The chalky scowl's carcass
in the cold furnace where the nasturtium
distills

existing like the leaves that appear just at evening
and in the goblet's shape (edges flared)
which speeds
the spiral
of the flower.
Azure slightly clatters from an airplane
crawling behind the clockface.
An unidentified object is raised
to the rank of enemy.
Icon.
We hurry with the word's identification, before rumor
can destroy it.

The poem—a late arrival on time. A change of prognosis.
Even the dullest town extends beyond the borders
of the pedestrian who crosses it
to set out the substance of memory—
I intend to say. . . .I in. . .that
what is said and emptiness, drawing in a selection
of the elements of utterance,
correlating,
discover desire's inexhaustible source—

what is said cannot be said again. The mailman explains:
false sense of shame. . .
Remains of winter—a scarecrow stuffed with rags and straw
burns, enchanted in the round dance's rays. Gnosis
of weather.
The ecstasy of unthinkable closeness (death knots
the slits in the shore—plastic operation)
leaving behind
the remains of reason–to the bone
from the first (a reflection) touch on the skin.
Thanks to the verb, meaning more often senseless
walking
along the sand or a swimmer, peeled by the imagination
from a point, trickling down the edge of the eye,
like a pea from a peapod

or intimacy with cold, bitten through by the cotton
whiteness,
rippling canvas, fading between current
and

weight, heaven knows where from and where
to against the deafened silver's wool,
clinging
to the intangible object of discord. Conjecture is simple—
the nasturtium is not

11.

needed. It is composed from the exceptional exactness
of language
commanding the thing—"to be"
and the rejection of understanding. We say sometimes. Sometimes
we speak: of another time. Right to the snare
of the mustard seed

signs, reminiscent and leading to reminiscence
in the disintegration of the poem to the last coil of the cocoon
of exhausting breath.

12.

The nasturtium—it is the undiminished procession
of forms, the geological chorus of voices crawling,
shouting, disclosing each other
when
day transforms evening into a hill of drifted insomnia
and a chirp
creeps into the mouth of an old man on a bench
but also a shriek, through the birch slides of fetid air
from the neighboring house,
by which you could check your watch, for the third year the same
swifts,

paper, taking root in the table tops' rough wood

a gas tank behind the crossing, near the gas pump,

collecting heat in the lines, and a face in the intrigue
of the anti-corrosive layer,
the center's different architecture. A particle is not related
to prayer. But see. Threading the seen through the needle,
whose greed
fits the impeccability of its choice—the narrowest

opening of form.

The nasturtium bears fire.

CLAYTON ESHLEMAN

Two Poems

BROWN THRASHER

The glass breaking in the treetop
the wine poised in the night sky
  break it break it
    shuttle it up shuttle it up
      psyche tone den

I thought of the double finger spots in Cougnac,
two signature-like black swipes
    Iamhere Iamhere
  addledandwounded addledandwounded
      psyche tone den

or the loudmouth next door who shouts everything twice
at his aged mother
  eat your eggs eat your eggs

Curious how life fears the first is not heard
a way of making an X repetition is a cancelling
                or does it rivet the former?
  thrasher no stop to ponder
  starts a new grid
      gives it up starts another
slash of its fielded screech
beak as needle breath thread
  shakahachi gob like a pearly hocker
              full in my oído

                  a springboard
  in the bio-core lithe divers
                  coiled blastophores

snake eyes corpora bigemina
  body of the double-gated
hearing the eyefullness
  of everything that looks back at us

Dracula gaze fixed in gnarled bark
I respected him = I looked back at him,
as if I had not seen him the first time?
Re/vision?

At 70, Wallace Stevens:
"It is an illusion that we were ever alive,
arranged ourselves
By our own motions in a freedom of the air."

But again the thrasher was machining
Bottleitup Bottleitup
what? what?
the bottle notion the bottle notion
the bale of our quarrel with
our quarrel with

the bottle tumbling in the spume,
a human ear.

[3 May 1986]

CHILDREN OF THE MONOSYLLABLE

I saw a fist
gripping a streaming,
as if beetle-words were flowing into a bottleneck from everywhichway,
and that in the slaughterhouse of the fist
they were killed, and transformed or
reborn—I could see
the words go in—and what seemed to be their children emerge—
they swiveled in like broom straws hungry for the hasp,
seeking to be
bundled, then flowed out the hasp into a second
flowering broom head,
the hasp vessel was the word CUNT,
the beetle-streams, as if emerging from mist, were hard to identify:

cunnus, yes, cyn, cunta,
parallel to country, kin, kind,
with shadows of city & cemetery,
cunabula, cunicle, cuniculate, cuneo with its cuneiform kin,
cunning wedge-words, vise-signs,
kennings, beetle-crevices, kens, or learnings—

Why did the beetle-words swarm into this vessel
that sapped them of their power? Before the transformation,
the cunea worked somewhat underground, they supped from
Cunti, or Kunda,
as if attached to Her Cuneibrain, termites? egg-carriers?
As if the vulva-lode were slightly under ground-level,
a flavoring of stone.
Words once did live across our eyes,
above and below the Dali razor blade.
And when too many lifted, the sun roasted our
lagoon life?

Language background might have been a termite hill?
A single sound-extent with a group soul?

So I've noticed one "hill," as from an airplane,
the cunae streaming in, as if below meaning,
at what point were thing/earth association words
blocked/wedged
out of themselves, frozen, into
their own mimicry?
Or were the cunae slaughtered? Tonsured, cunta into cunt,
country a cunt-tree pun, cunicle, cuniculate nearly lost,
blunt grunt runt HUNT
Monoculture is the reduction/crushing of the millipedal
mania to hit death with a difference

> But why from this round-about phrase must be guessed,
> What in ONE single SYLLABLE'S better expressed;
> That SYLLABLE then I my sentiment call,
> So here's to that WORD, which is ONE WORD for all.
>
> –G. A. Stevens, *Songs Comic & Satyrical*, 1788.

And the children? *Diddly-pout, eel-skinner,*
Eve's custom house, mole-catcher, moss-rose, star over the garter,
belly dingle, botany bay, butter boat, cuntkin, cunnie, dumb-squint,

fie-for-shame, fire-lock, flap doodle, oyster-catcher, nonny-nonny,
seed-plot, milking-pail, meat-market, rest-and-be-thankful,
road to a christening, standing room for one, Bluebeard's closet,
catherine wheel, Cupid's anvil, penwiper, mark-of-the-beast,
fumbler's hall, gravy giver, house under the hill, fud,
little spot where uncle's doodle goes, front doormat, snatch-blatch,
rob the ruffian, skin the pizzle, Smock-Alley. . .

They are attempts to free Her nature from its curse,
but they remain infected. More numerous than their beetle-
backgrounders,
they spread into our lives, amusing, disgusting,
flaccid mixtures of the ersatz and the other,
crinkum-crankum, doodle-sack—
suppose we made these children honorifics and placed them before
"sky" or "ocean," to re-link them to their goddess ancestor—
could we do this at all? Would people catch on? Would they care?
crinkum-crankum sky [clouds twisting, full of whimsey]
the doodle-sack sky [wind-swollen, bagpipe-bleating, god-blast-
encysted]
Would the great goddess therefore return? Might She invert
our poisonous world-end anti-ecology?

We'd have to, in flip-flop inversion, pass back through the bottleneck,
we'd have to re-experience, in another conscious first-time,
what the language-mind suffered, we'd have to run the *whim-wham*
sperm-sucker fie-for-shame film backwards, as we ourselves
assimilated the peril of the reduction of woman,
her identity crunched into a monosyllable

CUNT as termite-queen
laying 50,000 associations per day in mind,
nether-eyebrows, itching Jennies, roasting jacks.

Might we adopt these orphans? Might we nurse them?
Might we even croon: "under your cavey flavoring
we hear the RA, the OM, the KA
lingering gas, and GOD poor rotten corks
for bottles that wanted only to be perpetually sipped"

Little *mark-of-the-beast,* little *gutter,*
you bear the stink of a degradation
you are hardly responsible for.

Gutter then responded: "I'm happy to be
  a receptacle for dead leaves, rain, dead pigeons,
an inferior form of Kunta's cunabula.
True, I'm not life-emitting. I'm a drainpipe,
  people piss their tongues through me."

Each word a gateless gate, a dragon-tongue-tip
  unhinged from axial powers.
Gutter Cunabula convinced me.
    Every word's amphibian sound-tail
suckers what I cannot quite discern, it sinks
a nippled tentacle into the termite flow, as the word mites
bless, as they bang and bank off, as they scurry
egg-laden, egged on, in absolute midden to what I shall not
  be delivered to see,
but I can hear their vacuum nourishing the rust of a passing train,
    a halo-ford,
shroud and nave of the sordid cleat of tongue.

[5 November 1986]

GEORGES BATAILLE

Madame Edwarda

(Tr. from the French by Daniel Tiffany)

If you are afraid of everything, read this book; but first, listen to me: if you laugh, it is because you are afraid. A book, it seems to you, is something inert. That may be true. But what if, as happens, you don't know how to read? Should you be afraid. . .? Are you alone? Are you cold? Do you know to what degree Man is "yourself?" foolish? and naked?

My anguish, at long last, holds sovereign power. My dead sovereignty is in the streets. Imperceptible—an absolute silence surrounds it—crouched in anticipation of terror, and yet, its dismal nature pokes fun at everything.

Death is the most terrible of all things, and maintaining its work requires the greatest strength.
—Hegel

On a street corner, a filthy and overpowering anguish disfigured me (perhaps because I had seen a pair of furtive whores on the stairs of a ur-

---

Georges Bataille (1897-1962) first became active in Parisian literary circles in the 1920s. His brief association with Surrealism ended after a bitter dispute with the movement's leader, André Breton. Originally trained as a medievalist and a librarian, Bataille published works in a variety of fields, including fiction, philosophy, art history and literary criticism. His non-fiction writings, which offer a major reinterpretation and synthesis of the philosophies of Nietzsche and Sade, have influenced a generation of French theorists (Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva, Baudrillard).

Bataille's erotic fiction (of which "Madame Edwarda" is an example, written in 1941) should be read as a sub-genre of the *conte philosophique*. In a preface to "Madame Edwarda," Bataille declares that his erotic tales can be separated from his philosophical writings of the period only on the basis of a "regrettable convention." In particular, he directs the reader to a section entitled "Le Supplice" of his work *L'Expérience intérieure*.

inal). At such moments, all I want to do is vomit. I should strip myself naked, or strip the girls who turn my head: a tepid round of stale flesh would relieve me. But I settled for a cheaper remedy—I ordered a Pernod at the counter and gulped it down; I made my way from bar to bar until. . .evening was through falling.

I wandered into those propitious streets that lead from the intersection of Poissonnière to rue Saint-Denis. The darkness and the solitude consummated my drunkenness. The night was bare in the deserted streets, and I too wanted to bare myself: I stripped off my pants and threw them over my arm; I wanted to bind the evening chill within my legs,—an astonishing sense of freedom transported me. I could feel myself swelling like a pod about to burst. I took my stiff cock in my hand.

(Entering a subject is hard. I could have avoided it and remained "credible." In fact, I enjoy detours; but as it stands, the beginning is straight forward. Let us proceed. . .harder. . .)

Startled by a noise, I put my pants back on and headed for les Glaces: there I found the familiar light. Standing in a crowd of girls, Madame Edwarda, nude, seemed ill at ease. She looked ravishing to me. I chose her: she sat down beside me. The waiter had scarcely taken our order when I grabbed Edwarda, who surrendered herself: our two mouths mingled in a foul kiss. The room was crowded with men and women—the desert, such as it was, where the game dragged on. The moment her hand slipped down, I shattered suddenly like a window, and began to tremble in my pants. Holding her ass in my hands, I felt Madame Edwarda herself panic at the same time: in her astonished eyes, widening, a look of terror; and in her throat, a long strangling sound.

It occurred to me that I had wanted to lead a sordid life, or rather, inevitably, that things would turn out that way. I thought I heard laughter through the tumult of voices, the lights, the smoke. But nothing mattered anymore. I squeezed Edwarda in my arms; she smiled at me: suddenly I felt a chill, a new shock within me; a kind of silence drifted down from the ceiling and turned me to ice. I was lifted in a flight of angels who had neither bodies nor heads—only the rustling of wings. But it was simpler than that: I became unhappy and felt abandoned, as one feels in the presence of GOD. It was crazy, worse than being too drunk. At first, I was saddened by the thought that the magnificence falling around me was stripping me of the pleasures that I had counted on sharing with Edwarda.

I felt ridiculous: Edwarda and I hadn't exchanged two words. A moment of desperation came over me. I had no idea where I was or what was happening: amidst the confusion and the lights, night was falling around me. I wanted to flip the table over, wreck everything: the table was fixed, bolted to the floor! What could be more ridiculous? Everything had disappeared, the room and Madame Edwarda. The night alone...

A voice, all too human, drew me out of my stupor. The voice of Madame Edwarda, like her gracefully slender body, was obscene:

—You want to see my rags?

Gripping the table with both hands, I turned towards her. Seated, she cocked up one leg and spread her thighs: to open her slit even wider, she pulled back the folds of skin with her fingers. Thus, Edwarda's "rags," gaping at me, shaggy and pink; bursting with life like a repulsive squid. I stammered under my breath:

—What are you doing that for?

—You see, she said, I am GOD...

—And I am a madman...

—No, you must look. Don't turn away!

Her husky voice softened, and she made herself almost child-like to tell me wearily, with an inscrutable smile of abandon:

—Oh, I've come before!

But she had maintained her alluring pose. She commanded:

—Kiss me!

—But..., I protested, in front of the others?

—Of course!

I was trembling: I looked at her, immobile; she was smiling at me so gently that I was trembling. Finally, I knelt down, awkwardly, and I put my lips on that ardent wound. Her bare thigh caressed my ear: I seemed to hear the noise of waves breaking, the same noise one hears by putting a seashell to one's ear. In the absurdity of the brothel and the confusion surrounding me—I felt I couldn't breathe, my face was red, I was sweating—I remained oddly suspended, as if Edwarda and I were lost in a windy night before the sea.

I heard another voice, coming from a vigorous and beautiful woman, respectably dressed:

—My children, declared the mannish voice, it is time to go upstairs.

The sous-maitresse took my money; I stood up and followed Madame Edwarda, whose tranquil nudity crossed the room. But this simple passage amidst tables crowded with girls and their clients, this common rite of the "woman climbing the stairs," followed by the man who will make love to her, was, at that moment, no more than a solemn hallucination: the clacking of Edwarda's sharp heels on the tiled floor, the swaying gait of this tall, obscene body; the sour, female odor that I drank in the wake of this white body. Madame Edwarda was vanishing ahead of me. . .into crowds of people. The chaotic indifference of the room to her happiness, to the measured solemnity of her steps, resembled a royal consecration and streets carpeted with flowers: death itself was part of the fete, in the momentary evocation of the butcher's knife by the nudity of the brothel.

. . . . . .
. . . . . .
. . . . . .
. . . . . .
. . . . . .
. . . . . .
. . . . . .
. . . . . the mirrors which lined the walls, and of which the ceiling also was made, multiplied the animal image of copulation: the slightest movement delivered our exhausted hearts to the emptiness where innumerable reflections of ourselves confounded us.

Pleasure eclipsed us, finally. We rose and looked soberly at one another. Madame Edwarda fascinated me; I had never seen a girl so pretty, or so naked. Without taking her eyes off me, she pulled a pair of white silk stockings from a drawer: she sat down on the bed and drew them on. The exaltation of being naked possessed her: again, she spread her legs and pulled open her crack; the pungent nudity of our two bodies threw us back into the same exhaustion of the heart. She put on a white vest and concealed her nudity under a cloak; the hood of the cloak covered her head; a domino fringed with lace masked her face. Finished dressing, she pulled away from me, and said:

—Let's go now!

—But. . .you're allowed to leave? I asked her.

—Quickly, my pet, she replied happily, You can't go out with nothing on!

She held my clothes for me, and helped me to get dressed; but as she did so, her mood sustained at times a furtive exchange between her flesh and mine. We passed a maid in the narrow stairway. In the sudden darkness of the street, I turned, astonished, to find Edwarda fleeing, draped in black. She hurried away, leaving me behind: the mask which concealed her gave the impression of an animal. It wasn't cold out, but I was shivering. Edwarda, a stranger, a starry sky, wild and empty over our heads: I thought I would collapse, but I began to walk.

At that hour of the night, the streets were deserted. Suddenly, Edwarda, malevolent and without saying a word, ran past me, alone. The porte Saint-Denis was directly ahead of her: she stopped. I hadn't moved: Edwarda, motionless as I was, stood waiting under the gate, in the middle of the arch. She was black, entirely; simple, terrifying as a hole: I realized that she wasn't laughing, and also, more precisely, that, under the garment which veiled her, she was now absent. I knew then—the last trace of drunkenness gone—that she had not lied, that she was GOD. Her presence had the unintelligible simplicity of a stone: there, in the heart of the city, I felt as if I were in the mountains at night, amidst a vast, lifeless expanse.

I felt free of Her; I was alone before this black stone. I trembled to find before me the most desolate thing in the world. The comic horror of my situation did not escape me: the spectacle which, at that moment, paralyzed me with fear, a moment earlier. . . .The transformation had slipped by, undetected. In Edwarda, the act of mourning–a mourning without sadness or tears—had conveyed an empty silence. And yet, I wanted to know: this woman, so naked at the moment, who cheerfully called me her "pet". . .I crossed the street; my fears urged me to stop, but I kept walking.

She drew back, silent, sliding towards the pillar on the left. I was two steps away from the monumental gate; when I penetrated the stone arch, the cloak vanished without a sound. I listened, no longer breathing. I was astonished to find that I understood perfectly: I knew, when she ran past, that she had to run, to rush forward at all costs and stand beneath the gate; and when she stopped, that she was suspended in a kind of absence, far beyond any possible laughter. I could no longer see her; a death-like obscurity was descending from the vaults. Without

even thinking, I "knew" that a period of agony was beginning. I welcomed it, I wanted to suffer, to go further, to go on, even if I were forced to the brink of a "black hole." I understood, I wanted to understand, eager for her secret, not doubting for an instant that death reigned in her.

Shivering under the vault, terrified, I laughed:

—The only guy to disappear into the hole of this arch!

I trembled at the thought that she might escape, disappear forever. I trembled as I tried to accept it, but the image of her flight tormented me: I rushed forward, circling the pillar. I dashed to the pillar on the right: she had disappeared, I couldn't believe it! Devastated, I was standing before the gate, sinking into despair, when I glimpsed, on the other side of the boulevard, her cloak disappearing into the shadows: Edwarda, apparently still absent from the cloak, was standing in front of a terrace with rows of tables and chairs. I moved towards her: she seemed deranged, obviously from another world—less than a phantom, a lingering mist in the street. She drew back delicately upon my approach, bumping into a table on the empty terrace.

As if I had awakened her, she said in a lifeless voice:

—Where am I?

Out of desperation, I pointed out to her the empty sky over our heads. She looked up: for an instant, under the mask, eyes blank, she remained lost in the fields of stars. I held her up; both of her hands clutched obsessively at the cloak to hold it shut. She began to writhe convulsively. She was in pain; I thought she was crying, but it seemed as though the world and all of its anguish were suffocating in her, unable to burst into tears. She pushed me away, seized by an obscure wave of disgust: suddenly enraged, she rushed forward, then stopped and threw off the cloak, showing the cheeks of her ass. She cocked her hips to one side; a moment later, she came back and hurled herself on me. A wind of savagery arose in her: she struck me angrily in the face, pounding me with her fists, in the furious impulse of a brawl. I stumbled and fell; she fled.

I wasn't even back on my feet—I was on my knees—when she returned. She shouted at the sky, her voice hoarse, strained beyond its limits; her arms thrashed the air in horror:

—I can't breathe, she screamed, but you, miserable priest's hide, I'M ONLY BORING YOU. . . .

Her voice broke into a kind of death-rattle; she stretched out her hands for my throat, and collapsed.

Breathless, seized by violent spasms in her chest, she tossed on the ground like part of a severed earthworm. I leaned over her and pulled back the lace on the mask, which she was swallowing and shredding between her teeth. The reckless force of her movements had exposed her completely: her breasts spilled from the bolero; I saw her flat pallid belly, and the hairy crack gaping above her stockings. Her nudity, now, was devoid of sense; at the same time, it labored under the excessive meaning of death's garment. The strangest thing—and the most anguishing—was the silence in which Edwarda remained enclosed: of her suffering, communication was no longer possible. I was absorbed in the absence of any signal—in this night of the heart which was no less solitary nor less hostile than the empty sky. The atrocious exertion of her body leaping like a fish, the vile rage crumpling her face, charred the life in me, leaving a residue of disgust.

(I must explain: it would be wrong to suggest that irony plays a part in my statement that Madame Edwarda is GOD. But, to say that GOD is a prostitute in a whorehouse, is an unreasonable statement. To be honest, I am happy that one cannot help but laugh at my misfortunes: he alone understands me whose heart is afflicted with an incurable wound, such that no one could possible cure him of it . . . . And what man, wounded, would allow himself to "die" from any other sort of wound?)

The awareness that night of an irremediable act, as I was kneeling beside Edwarda, was neither less lucid nor less terrifying than at this moment as I am writing. Her suffering in me was like the truth of an arrow: one is aware that it has entered the heart, but only upon death. In anticipation of the void, that which remains is nothing more than a slagheap over which my life lingers in vain. Before a silence so utterly black, there occurred a leap in my despair: Edwarda's contortions wrenched me out of myself and thrust me beyond blackness, mercilessly, like the delivery of a condemned man to the executioner.

When, after the interminable wait, a man destined to undergo corporal punishment in broad daylight at the very place where the horrible act will be accomplished, he observes the preparations; his heart is in his

mouth: on his narrow horizon, each object, each face, assumes an oppressive significance and aids in tightening the vice from which it is already too late to escape. When I saw Madame Edwarda writhing on the ground, I entered a similar state of concentration, but the change which occurred in me did not confine me: the horizon before which Edwarda's misery had placed me was fleeing, like the object of a painful obsession. Bewildered and desolate, I felt a surge of power as I surrendered myself to a tide of self-hatred. The dizzying descent, which was destroying me, had opened a prairie of indifference inside me; it was no longer a question of solicitude, of desire: the parching ecstasy of fever, at that point, arose from the absolute impossibility of restraint.

(It is deceptive—if, in fact, I must reveal myself—to play with words, to assume the laboring gait of sentences. If no one reduces what I am saying to nudity, by snatching away the clothing, the form, then I write in vain. [Especially since I know beforehand that my effort is bound to fail: the lightning which dazzles me—and which strikes me—undoubtedly will have blinded only my own eyes.] Still, Madame Edwarda is not a phantom from a dream; her sweat did soak my handkerchief: at that moment when, led by her, I arrive, I would like in my own turn to lead. This book has its secret; I must not reveal it. It is more remote than any word.)

The crisis subsided at last. The convulsions continued a little longer, but without the same fury. She caught her breath; her features relaxed, ceased to be hideous. Suddenly exhausted, I lay down beside her on the pavement for a moment. I covered her with my coat. She wasn't heavy, so I decided to carry her; the taxi station on the boulevard was nearby. She remained lifeless in my arms. Progress was slow; I had to stop three times on the way to the station. In the meantime, she came to; and when we arrived, she wanted to stand up: she took a step and faltered. I caught her by the waist and helped her into the car.

She said feebly:

—. . .not yet. . .tell him to wait. . .

I asked the driver not to leave yet; beside myself with fatigue, I climbed in the back seat and collapsed next to Edwarda.

We remained silent a long time—Madame Edwarda, the driver, and I—motionless in our seats, as if the car were moving.

Edwarda said to me finally:

—Tell him to go to les Halles!

I spoke to the driver, and he started the car.

He drove us through dismal streets. Calmly and slowly, Edwarda undid the ties of her cloak and let it slip off. She no longer had on a mask. She took off her vest, and said to herself in a low voice:

—Naked as an animal.

She stopped the car by tapping on the window, and got out. She walked up to the driver, close enough to touch him, and said:

—You see. . .I'm naked now. . .come on.

The driver, motionless, stared at the animal: she cocked up one leg and spread her thighs, wanting him to see her slit. Unhurriedly, and without a word, the man got out of the car. He was simple, and built like a hydrant. Edwarda wrapped herself around him, forcing her mouth onto his, and pried into his trousers with her hand. She dropped his pants to the ground and said to him:

—Come into the back seat.

He came and sat down beside me. Edwarda stepped in after him; she climbed voluptuously onto his hips and stuffed the hard knot into herself with one hand. I remained motionless, watching. Her movements were slow and calculating, from which she drew, visibly, an intense pleasure. The other responded—he gave himself brutally with his whole body: born of the stark intimacy of these two people, little by little, their embrace arrived at the point of excess where the heart is absent. The driver heaved forward, panting. I turned on the overhead light in the taxi. Edwarda, bolt upright, was straddling the worker; head thrown back, her hair dangling down. Bracing her by the nape of the neck, I could see the whites of her eyes. She strained against the hand that bore her up, and the tension increased the rattle of her breathing. Her eyes rolled back into place; a moment later she seemed to quiet down. She saw me. From her glance, at that moment, I knew she was returning from the impossible; and I saw, in her depths, a dizzying steadfastness. The root, the flood which now overwhelmed her, spurted in her tears: tears streamed from her eyes. Love in these eyes was dead; a chill of dawn emanated from them, a transparency in which I could read death. And everything was bound up in this dream-gaze: nude bodies, fingers opening flesh, my anguish, and the memory of foam at her lips—there was nothing which did not contribute to this blind descent into death.

Edwarda's pleasure—torrent of spring-waters, flowing in her with the power to split the heart—was prolonged outrageously: the surge of

delight did not cease to glorify her being, to make her nudity more nude, her indecency more shameful. Body and face ecstatic, given over to ineffable cries, she bore, in her tenderness, a desperate smile: she saw me in the arid depths of my spirit; from the depth of my sadness, I sensed the torrent of her joy break loose. My anguish resisted the pleasure I should have admitted: Edwarda's mournful pleasure aroused in me an exhausting sensation of wonder. My distress and my feverishness seemed trivial to me, but that was all I possessed, the only virtues in myself which responded to the ecstasy of that which, in the recess of a cold silence, I called "my heart."

The final tremors seized her, slowly; her body, still foaming, slackened. In the back of the taxi, the driver, after love, was sprawled out. Edwarda was still propped against my hand; the knot in her neck loosened. I helped her to stretch out, and wiped away her sweat. Eyes dead, she offered no resistance. I had turned off the light: she was half asleep, like a child. A similar sleep must have settled over us—Edwarda, the driver, and me.

(Continue? I intended to, but I've had enough. The interest just isn't there. I write about whatever is on my mind at the moment of writing: is this all absurd? or is there some meaning to it? I drive myself crazy thinking about it. I wake up in the morning, like millions of others: little girls and boys, babies, old men—last night's sleep dissipated forever . . . Myself and these millions, does our waking have some meaning? A hidden meaning? Obviously hidden! But if nothing makes sense, I've wasted my time. I'll beat a hasty retreat, availing myself of every imaginable trick! I should abandon everything, and sell myself to nonsense: as far as I'm concerned, it's the executioner who tortures me and who kills me, not some shadow of hope. And if there is a meaning? I haven't figured it out yet. Tomorrow? How should I know! I can't conceive of meaning that is not "my" punishment; as for that, I know it well. But for the moment: nonsense! Mr. Nonsense writes, he knows he is crazy; it's frightening. But his madness—this nonsense—as it is, suddenly becomes "serious:" might that be, precisely, "the meaning?" [No, Hegel has nothing to do with the "apotheosis" of a madwoman. . . .] My life has no meaning unless I myself am meaningless, unless I am insane. Let those who can understand; let those who shall die understand. . . Being is there, not knowing why, always trembling from the cold. . . .; the infinite, the night surrounds it, and it is there precisely to. . ."not to

know " And GOD? What is there to say, Mr. Eloquent, Mr. Believer?—God, at least, wouldn't He know? GOD, if He "knew," would be a pig.* Lord [I appeal, in my distress, to "my heart"] deliver me; blind them! And the story, shall I continue?)

I have finished.

From the sleep that released us some time later in the back of the taxi, I woke up sick, the first. . . .The rest is irony; long anticipation of death. . .

* I said: "God, if He "knew," would be a pig." Someone (I imagine He would be momentarily unwashed, disheveled) who would grasp the idea in its entirety. What could He possibly have in common with a human being? And beyond that, everything else. . .farther and farther. . .HIMSELF, hovering in ecstasy over an empty space. . .And now? I TREMBLE.

NOTES, CORRESPONDENCE, REVIEWS

As many of our readers know, *Sulfur* made a big move in the fall of 1986 from Los Angeles, to Ypsilanti. We wrote many of our readers, asking for some extra support, and the response was solid and very helpful. We had planned to thank individuals in #19, but since donations are still coming in, and since it has been impossible to determine at this time via the EMU Development Office the names of everyone who has responded, we feel it is best to delay printing the names of the "friends of *Sulfur*" until next fall.

As of April, 1987, Jed Rasula will take over *Sulfur's* NCR section, so from this point on all material for the NCR should be sent to Jed c/o *Sulfur*. The following statement by Rasula summarizes his intentions as the new editor of the NCR:

"The welcome contributions of John Yau and Clark Coolidge, *Sulfur's* art and music editors, have made it clear that the magazine would benefit by actively pursuing in its 'Notes Correspondence Reviews' an expanded context. That we now propose to actively engage 'the whole art' of *Sulfur's* subtitle is not to neglect poetry, but to relocate it pragmatically in a force-field of overlapping social concerns and trans-generic considerations. Pursuing this, we propose to open up formats, to encourage elasticity of topic as well as a radical re-visioning of modes of writing. In particular, we favor the full range of potential reviews, from the trenchant highly-focused paragraph, aphoristically precise, to the longer treatment that addresses not only text but context. We want to sustain our unpredictable diversity, augmenting it by making it more casual *and* more rigorous at the same time."

Lastly, a note on the Birkerts piece on Ashbery, and the response to it (all in this NCR) by four *Sulfur* editors. I had asked Birkerts to review Ashbery's *Selected Poems* and he had agreed to. I accepted the piece he sent in, and then began to have second-thoughts about it. *Sulfur* had printed Ashbery's poetry in the past, and I had asked John for new unpublished work about a year ago. What kind of an obligation does the magazine have to its contributors in regard to reviews of their books? Can we justify printing a decidedly negative review of someone whose writing we see as an essential part of what the magazine proposes? [I must say that some of my concerns over the Birkerts "review" were a result of *Exquisite Corpse* having printed a couple of my own works, and in subsequent issues publishing letters to the editor that abusively attacked me. While Birkerts' "review" is not a personal attack on Ashbery himself, it is basically a dismissal of the significance of his poetry. Was I in my own way about to repeat Andrei Codrescu's shoddy editing by running the Birkerts?]

While I was brooding about this matter, Ashbery offered *Sulfur* seven unpublished poems, and I accepted 3 of them (the 3 that appear in this issue). Not only did such acceptance intensify my conflict over running the Birkerts, but since the range of concerns represented in these new Ashbery poems seemed to me to be outside the aspects of Ashbery that Birkerts dismisses, I thought that the mere presence of the poems and the "review" would simply be wrong. At the same time, it did not seem right to now pull the Birkerts: it had been accepted, and was conscientiously written by a new *Sulfur* commentator who we had published (on Herbert and Blackburn) in recent issues.

So I sent the Birkerts to most of the people on *Sulfur's* masthead, 4 responded, and their responses follow the "review" in the current issue. Had they come in a bit earlier, I would have then sent them to Birkerts and have given him a chance at having the last word. Since they came in right before *Sulfur's* typesetting deadline, any response from Birkerts will have to go into #20, next fall.

While at this point I feel that I have handled this matter as responsibly as I can, I do not think I have solved its thorny facets. The question remains that I raised previously: what should be editorial policy on extremely negative (not merely critical) reviews of essential contributors? The question has siblings: should a magazine like *Sulfur* print reviews of its own editors, and if not all editors, which ones? *Sulfur* is somewhat pyramidal in editorial structure, with me having the most editorial input, and the Correspondents having the least. We all agree that none of my work should be reviewed in the magazine (a decision I agree with, but am not happy about), but the policy has shifted about with regard to the rest of the masthead. Does such cautious humility really smack of lack of confidence? In Césaire's *Tropiques* only criticism that supported the editors' work was published—but *Tropiques*, one might reply, was a group or movement magazine and *Sulfur* attempts to be focused *and* eclectic. But why should we not all have as much supportive exegesis of our work in the magazine as possible? For none of us can count on intelligent attention in the academic quarterlies or the Sunday book reviews. Yet if I have qualms about printing Birkerts on Ashbery, I realize that I would not entertain for a moment the thought of printing an attack on any of the masthead. Can editorial policy remain "open?"

—CE

HENRI MICHAUX (1899-1985)

It was only by chance that a few months ago I came across a notice of Henri Michaux's death: it was as though he had left the world as discreetly as he had lived in it, never quite at home, never entrenched in it. There is no call for mourning, but for acknowledgement: his work is here, the tireless (but also relentless, uncomfortable) accumulation of a man determined to stay *awake* at all costs, to the last possible moment. There is no need, either, to try to conjure up what Michaux might now tell us, "from the other side"; for his whole work has been addressed to us across that threshold between day and night, between the flickering focus of consciousness and the twilight that is its envelope in a darkness we can only indicate by subtraction.

My first image is of a hand, poised above a page: poised, in Brassai's photograph, amid an intimate litter of books, crumpled paper, bottles of ink, brushes, *waiting*. A seismograph, registering the slightest human tremor (but this perturbation is the echo of massive subterranean shifts). An almost anonymous hand–Michaux would never (until recently) allow a photograph of more than his silhouette to be published–a faithful scribe of the invisible. A hand that might not *belong* to anyone (the arm extends out of the frame), at the same time as the marks it inscribes are what we call handwriting, signature. Hand writing, taking down, transcribing, translating something that does not fit easily into words, that does not quite belong in the world of language. So much of Michaux's work pivots at the edge between writing and drawing: skeletal alphabets, eroded hieroglyphs; and in the other hand (in the mescalinian manuscripts) that point where the pen frees itself from the fragile tyranny of writing and unravels into its own meanders.

A man never quite at home in the everyday madness of the world. One of Michaux's early texts centres on the eerily innocent "Plume" (1930) for whom the ordinary and the extraordinary are equally incomprehensible (but Plume never protests, he is scrupulously polite; nothing surprises him, because everything astonishes him). Plume is a visitor, a reporter ("pen") from Elsewhere: like Caspar Hauser, he wanders in the world we take for granted.

Conversely, what we pick up by the handle of "fantastic", what might be served up as "original", is relayed, almost neutrally, by this same hand. Recording without distortion or feedback, Michaux's is not a disembodied voice; it has a tangible grip: the unease, the discomfort that it turns on is anatomical, psychosomatic. Nothing here of the convenient release of the "spiritual" that uses the physical as springboard. Yet there is no doubt that Michaux is an outstanding anthropologist of the so-called inner world: *Voyage En Grande Garabagne* (1936) and *Au Pays De La Magie* (1941) are *alibis*, imaginary ethnographies whose fieldwork gives glimpses of worlds whose orders question our own. The language is simple and lucid, giving an illusion of familiarity with a world that is slightly out of synch, and which is all the more unsettled because its strangeness is presented so factually. There is no fanciful elaboration, no dramatic emphasis: a variant human nature is indicated deftly, economically, in the few details from which an entire culture might be deduced.

The apparent reticence is, however, deceptive: Michaux's writing is exactly, almost musically, pitched; its reiterations are respectful, its incantations measured. It is like the carefully calibrated dose of a substance that is poisonous in larger quantities. The *efficacity* of these texts is crucial. Michaux is not escapist, he does not retreat from a cruel or sordid outer world into the recesses of the fantastic: if the repercussions of "external" events—the war years, the death of his wife in an accident—penetrate the work, the savagery and blackness of certain passages comes to meet them half-way. The terrible, bleak sentences of *Epreuves, Exorcismes* (1940-44) do not refer to any specific actuality, but they outline the inside skin of historical events (as, in a different, "paranoid", way Artaud's *Lettres de Rodez* do): they conjure back against the overwhelming weight of outward emergencies, bombardments and attacks. And this conjuring is not to be taken lightly, even if its tone is sometimes wry or ironic; it flares up, explodes, it is projectile, refulgent, vindictive.

Michaux's work lays siege to the commonplace defence systems that separate inner from outer reality, it infiltrates behind their entrenched positions, a double agent. What comes to light makes its appearance as if from the other side of the retina; but it appears just as really. From early on, there is a trace of Oriental metaphysics: but—as with Daumal, with whom Michaux has many affinities—it is not an exotic, imported detachment, a comfortable distance through the wrong end of some spiritualised telescope; it is harsh, stringent and severe, but it has no final authority.

The earlier writings, sometime easy to mistake for Surrealist excursions, undermine the ground of the literal—and of its shadow, the italicised figure. Later these excavations are substantiated, from the opposite side, in Michaux's use of various "drugs" (cannabis, mescaline, L.S.D.). Here the perspective is reversed: the natural immediacy of perception is gradually eroded, turned outside in. With exquisite and excruciating pains—for he is at once subject and observer of his own melting consciousness—Michaux records the minute accelerations and decelerations of experience. This could be Rimbaud's systematic "derangement of the senses", in that the fluctuation or collapse of normal "out-there" perception is documented, verbally and visually, in its intimate texture. But this dilapidation is not a wilful intoxication or a busting-through barriers to some infinite mirage; it sets out from utter sobriety (Michaux was, in fact, exceptionally abstemious): he *subjects* himself to abandon. The account is honest, counter-inflationary. The contradiction in the title *Miserable Miracle* (1956) points to the recognisable phenomenon, in a small-scale acid trip, of spectacular ocular captivation with an emotional emptiness or flatness: a contradiction to the short-cut mysticism so often identified with this.

Not that Michaux confines himself to a purely descriptive level. *Connaissance Par Les Gouffres* (1966) and *Les Grands Epreuves De L'Esprit* (1967)

should be required reading for experimental psychologists: they are infinitely more informative about the fine grain of the relationship between the experiencing subject and his world than countless "objective" reports. Here are depictions of the utmost phenomenological accuracy (Michaux's findings fit the complex structures of Merleau-Ponty but the language is—and has to be—that of a poet, i.e., of a man practised in acute self-observation, and in the handling of language, who carefully attends to their interplay). This is not the poetry of extravagance or contrivance: it belongs to the same tradition of giving speech-shape to the inarticulate as does Rilke.

The mescalinian texts are accompanied by—and sometimes inseparable from–drawings. Michaux's pictorial work dates back to the late 1920s, and constitutes a parallel career in its own right. It occupies a space which is not far removed physically from that occupied by writing—and its scratchy, blotted texture is indeed a kind of text (anticipating Derrida's notion of "ecriture")—one in which the roles of positive and negative, of scrubbed black ink and flashes of white paper, sometimes hang in the balance. Other drawings are prospective, a visionary interrogation in which Michaux conjures up presences that, like spirits of the dead in some divinatory rite, float up against the threshold between visible and invisible. The mescalinian drawings are "documentary" in that they record the bendings and stretchings of a space that is "interior" only in the sense that it is no longer tethered to the perception of objects "out-there".

Despite his acknowledged reputation, Michaux has not been much translated into English: the essential works of the period 1930-50, in particular, remain, so far as I am aware, out of reach. This cannot be because they are that hard to translate. Perhaps Michaux's voice is unfashionable—too cool, too impersonal: in which case it is all the more necessarily a corrective. At all events, this is a shameful blank on the map of Twentieth-century literature. I choose this moment to record my own immense debt to a rare spirit: Henri Michaux.

—DAVID MACLAGAN

ROBERT BLY, *SELECTED POEMS*
Harper and Row, 1986

Ster-, the Indo-European root behind *stereotype*, means stiff, in the sense of hard, severe, inflexible. It also feeds into the Old English for the verb *stare*, so that to stare at a type or example is to constitute a stereotype.

Now, among the many competing and overlapping poetry worlds in the U.S., Robert Bly has been the archetypal mid-westerner. Through his editorial work and personal appearances he has been staring down his rivals for three decades. He has not blinked; he's constituted a stereotype of American poetry out of what he's seen.

As I see it, Bly's stereotype is so outdated in crucial ways as to be little more than evidence of his hardened stare. But acts of stereotyping often bring into being their opposites, and in this case it's Bly himself who has come to stand as a stereotype. That is, what Bly signifies to many serious poets has little to do with his actual efforts, accomplishments, or presence. Our stereotype of Bly is by now a long embedded characteristic of our domestic imperialism and its particular neurosis (discernible in wave after wave of poetry schools, clusters and cliques in L.A., S.F. & N.Y.) which I will call Fear of the Provinces–or, more evocatively, Fear of the Heartland.

The neurosis works like this: "If a man, cautious, / hides his limp, somebody has to limp it. Things / do it; the surroundings limp." (*SP* 153-4). Something in the animal heartbeat of contemporary American poetry on the east and west coast is hiding its limp, but where we see the limp is in Robert Bly. Let's consider Bly's three main areas of practice, with an eye to what the heartland has to say to the coastline.

First, Bly as editor. Issues of *The Fifties* and *The Sixties* are worth re-examining now, 1986, especially by those with rancorous memories of the period when Bly's magazine was not only being published but *appearing*, like a buffoon in the Camelot American castle ball. Bly's was possibly the only magazine of the late Fifties/early Sixties that regularly printed in-depth essays on younger poets' work (Creeley, Merwin, Simpson, Logan, Snyder, Levertov and Dickey being the main beneficiaries). Bly himself supplied plenty of commentary on all sorts of topics throughout the run, and was not averse to raucous assaults on occasion (Lowell and Dickey, most memorably). Most of his polemic was aimed at the New Critical foothold and the (in 1960 U.S.A.) monstrous neglect of much of the world's greatest modern poetry. To this end most of the space of the magazine was given over to publishing translations (generally with the originals—even if in Norwegian or Roumanian). The extent to which Bly was one of the key wholesale importers of poetry from abroad can be grasped at a glance from this abbreviated list of names culled from his magazine: Benn, Celan, Trakl, Rilke, Montale, Ekelöf, Char, Michaux, Machado, Lorca, Huidobro, Vallejo, Neruda. Bly's power of discrimination on the domestic front, on the other hand, left much to be desired. Who now (or maybe even then!) knows anything of Margaret Sheinin, George Kresensky, Thomas Parnell, Charles Reynolds, Benjamin Clemenson, Richard LaFuze, E.D. Blodgett, Louis Hammer, Durward Collins, Jr., or Lewis Lipsitz? Only through the occasional inclusion of a Snyder, Rothenberg, Levertov, Kinnell or Ignatow poem does Bly's roster keep from being a total shutout. *The Sixties* may have had the lowest batting average of any significant postwar mag in this American league of poetry.

It had to be other features that kept readers attending: the translations, commentaries and atmospheric editorial presentation helped. But just as memorable were the regular publication of parodies and satires, going so far as to include a stinging pastiche of the typical Bly Poem, next to an early lampoon of "Quarrels Bubullski," the ox of L.A. Another commendable aspect of the magazine was its political stance, ranging from an editorial on H-bomb testing to advocacy of the draft resisters league, its publication of Leroi Jones' account of his arrest and battery by police, and finally the bold decision to cancel subscriptions to 31 university libraries at "institutions we know to have money from the C.I.A. or the armed services for research on chemical and germ warfare." (Surely the fact that only one subsequent issue ever appeared is telling.)

In retrospect, Bly's Original Recipe for a lively magazine appears to have been forsaken by later editors. The only comparable effort was *Montemora* in the Seventies—over-serious in comparison with *The Sixties'* good humor, but equally attentive to poetry in translation, morally and politically conscientious (though not as outspoken as Bly) and with a minimal involvement in domestic poetry (but with better results when it was). The dominant element in *The Sixties'* impact was its modest size, making a most varied package in a format designed for reading in a single sitting. Virtually all later American poetry magazines with an admirably eclectic array of contents suffer from their amplitude—generous in intent, not to be scoffed at, but in every case curtailing the potential impact.

Bly's second domain has been as critic, spokesman, and traveling enthusiast of poetry at large. Certainly nobody can compete with him for sheer exuberance in the presentation of poetry in public readings. His approach flaunts tactics which are anathema to nearly all other American poets: he knows poems by heart, and recites rather than reads; he spends as much or more time presenting the poetry of others as he does his own; and he expresses his enthusiasm in any way he can, talking affably, aggravatedly, spiritedly about his concerns in ways that owe more to Barnum and Bailey than to Brooks and Warren. While it may be wise to resist some of Bly's excesses, his presence makes conspicuous the immense well of reserve (and, one suspects, lack of commitment) in most American poetry reading situations. American poets want so desperately to be taken seriously they forget that pointedly maintaining a serious demeanor is a mode of behavior most often encountered in grumpy children, press secretaries and State Department spokesmen.

Bly learned his rhetorical public style as an antiwar activist in the Sixties, the high point of which was his acceptance of the 1968 National Book Award for poetry for *The Light Around The Body*. Using the ceremonial occasion to speak out (yet again) against the war, he criticized the publishing industry for its neutrality and went so far as to ask "What has my own publisher, Harper & Row, done to help end the war? Nothing." Asking "if the country is dishonored, where will it draw its honor from to give to its writers?" he handed over his $1,000.00 prize to a representative of the draft

resisters league, counseling civil disobedience. At the time there were those who dismissed even this as part of Bly's flamboyantly clumsy provincial style; but from a vantage point of nearly 20 years, it stands out in the small, bitter, snippety world of American poetry as one of the few ennobling gestures a poet has been in the position to make in the public life of this nation. From Robert Frost at the Kennedy inauguration to Robert Bly at the National Book Award is as concise a record of the turbulent decade of the Sixties as any of the actual poetry written during that time.

There's something in Bly's handling of the National Book Award situation that is more deft and illuminating than most of his poetry. This may mean that he's a better actor (in its most variegated sense) than a poet. In assembling his *Selected Poems* Bly has re-enacted his career, characteristically refusing to toss together the usual neutered catch—the title being his only concession to the genre. He's used the occasion to make an honest assessment of his career, grouping the poems symptomatically and introducing them with concise autobiographical and thematic considerations. In the demands of telling his story, he's included poems that might not have made it into the conventional *Selected*, and he's even made revisions in poems when the original struck him as "too expansive and excitable." As a result of such thoroughgoing re- (and self-)examination the whole is decidedly greater than its parts. From 200 pages I could find scarcely a dozen pieces meriting unrestrained enthusiasm (among which I would include "Snowfall in the Afternoon," "Counting Small-Boned Bodies," "August Rain," "The Ant Mansion," "The Watcher" and "My Father's Wedding"). In most instances I found, to my dismay, that poems I remembered for great images were memorable only for those images.

Bly's particular claim for poetry—from editorials in his magazine, through such anthologies as *News of the Universe*, and repeatedly in interviews—is as a kind of nourishment. "Taking care of animals is the best preparation for writing poems. When you write poems, you feed poems language." (*Talking All Morning*, 200). And commenting on the anti-rationalist poetry of Hölderlin, Novalis and Nerval he says "I imagine [their effort] as an enormous upswelling of water, and that water is still fresh and drinkable." (*News of the Universe*, 4). Bly's own associative ingenuity offers much that is drinkable, in his terms, amid even more that is unpalatable. The major flaw in his work is an impoverished sense of the language. Such qualities as get to be called sonorous or musical in Pound or Duncan, Stevens or Bunting, are absolutely lacking in Bly's soundscape. His language is homely (not a fault in itself) and often sounds more like a translation than his actual translations do (sample: "Books don't want to remain in the same room with us anymore." [*SP* 84]). The poems are further hobbled by remaining, almost without exception, in the present tense. A few early poems recounting dreams slip into the past, and some prose poems set the scene with past-tense description that quickly yields to present action. A handful of the most recent poems

show some slight flexibility at handling more than one tense. But all in all, it doesn't amount to much. Surely the "presence" Bly's legionnaires hearken to when they hear him read is compounded by that unyielding immediacy of the present tense.

There's another factor that hampers his quest for a "leaping poetry," and keeps his poems closed off from any kind of abrupt concision other than through images. Proposing that the joy of poetry is the experience of leaping inside the poem, Bly has written that "A poet who is 'leaping' makes a jump from an object soaked in unconscious substance to an object or idea soaked in conscious psychic substance." (*The Seventies* #1, p. 6). This insight unfortunately relegates all of the activity of the poem to a sphere of demonstrable objects outside the poem, which the poem can only report on secondhand. Bly's philosophic idealism virtually eliminates any consideration of the sort of syntactic condensation that Zukofsky, for instance, accomplished in *"A" 22-23* without abandoning object, image, conscious or unconscious, soaking or leaping. While Zukofsky's poem never gets as alluringly plainspoken as Bly's "The planet turns, and cows / wait for the grassblades / to come rushing to their mouths" (*SP* 166), *"A" 22-23* offers a more complete immersion in the materiality of this cosmological position. For all his insistence on getting rid of abstractions (like plural nouns) and on grounding the poem's flight in concrete objectivity, Bly has consistently written poetry too modest and too easy to read to accomplish his aims. At one point he writes

> . . .I threw some parts of me away
> at ten; others at twenty; a lot around 28.
> I wanted to thin myself out as a wire is thinned.
> Is there enough left of me now to be honest? (*SP* 116)

—a compelling question. It's to Bly's credit that failure, exhaustion, betrayal and avoidance are central themes—generally depicted in painfully personal terms.

> I am less than half risen. I see how carefully
> I have covered my tracks as I wrote,
> how well I have brushed over the past with my tail.
> Faces that look at me from the shallow waters,
> where I have pushed them down—
> father and mother pushed into the dark. (*SP* 126)

The temporalized struggle here speaks to a real, ongoing engagement. In most other instances, however, Bly's eternal present demagnetizes many images that, without temporal mutation, just flake away into those alleged depths where you lose sight of them. At that point, the incredulous scoff, while the Bly fan is dutifully spooked by the hollow sound coming up from the bottom of the well.

Bly's primary audience nationwide consists of fans and readers from beyond the narrow poetry circles most poets thrive in. As a result, he's spawned a legion of admirers too easy to please—a captive audience, a flock of cooing doves. Bly's life as a poet has been sustained by the kind of people he's so (accurately) critical of in interviews and essays: vegetarian peaceniks, wishful-buddhist yes-men and women for the age of acquarius and the return of the great mother. "It seems to me that that the problem with the whole thing is that we each hope we can find some position in which we will be holier without making any terrific amount of effort." (*Talking All Morning*, 146; see further critiques on pp. 90, 92, 252-4). Bly's critics have also tended to be mascots. Following a now standard practice, the critic becomes puppy to the poet-master and seeks to please. This audacious critical lusting after approval has even led in one instance to an appraisal of *The Man In the Black Coat Turns* as a book in which "we see Robert Bly turned thus, back into unity" (unity being one of the primal Western hang-ups Bly has never ceased scoffing at). Little wonder, then, the man has made a point of commenting on such hapless docility in a milieu that ironically doesn't even offer the sorts of coercion that silence people in other occupations:

> I think it's mainly the absence of public criticism that's a disaster: the disappearance of criticism...We notice magazines with nothing but poems in them, not a single review or "idea" article. The cliche of the last ten years is, "I want to say something positive. If I can't say something positive I don't want to say anything at all." There is a fear of having and using power. (*Talking All Morning*, 293)

Bly could only make this claim of course by absenting himself from circles where heated, animated discussion of poetry occur. If the specific subcommunity of poets Bly has been in contact with in recent years has been conspicuously reticent about engaging in criticism, his point is understandable. But as a blanket statement it's yet another sign of Bly's provincialism, serving mainly to cast him in the privileged role of *enfant terrible* within a narrow circle of *enfants dociles*. In that circle he's uncritically admired; in others, he's just as uncritically ignored. And it's these others, most removed from Bly's news of the universe, who could benefit by his particular animal presence, refreshing sense of self-appraisal, and his gifts of communication (as distinct from 'gifts of expression').

Bly has arduously wrestled his way out of a confining tradition of poetry as taxidermy: the artificial posturing of persons and places into typical eternal moments. It stands to his credit that he avoided the lure of excess which his immediate predecessors (Lowell, Berryman, Sexton) made attractive to several generations of Americans bent on fetishizing personal experience. In seeking out the resonance of experience in a non-human context, Bly is very much a poet in the American grain of Emersonian pantheism, of Whitman's heraldry

of universal consciousness. He's justly celebrated for his incredulous hunches that speak to multiple conditions of existence ("We live in wooden buildings made of two-by-fours, making the landscape nervous for a hundred miles." [*SP* 132]). Being a poet of the vernacular miniature, it might have served Bly well to have read Dickinson too, which he seems not to have done. Otherwise he might have been led to a conception of that arduous *syntactic* leaping that precedes even the manifest patent of the image. In this era of the mass consumption of images, Bly's choice of the image-raft for his poetry is in many ways sadly antiquated. In this, he unwittingly shares an historical moment with the farmer pouring petrochemical fertilizers into his land to keep up with agribusiness. Given this scenario, Fear of the Provinces should be an incitement to further examination, and not the metropolitan disdain that it is.

—JED RASULA

"WRITING THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY"
On Bob Perelman's *The First World*

In a review of Philip Booth's *Selected Poems* in the *New York Times*, Mark Rudman assures us that, "Although anyone who cares about poetry knows his work, Mr. Booth has never been a fashionable poet." I thought I cared about poetry, yet I had barely heard of Mr. Booth myself. Could it be that I was both uncaring and fashionable at the same time? Apparently so, for to be fashionable is to be the victim of various competing isms that tempt the poet from every corner, and surely I had been tempted by some of them. "What are we to do," Rudman asks,

> in a time of so many isms and genres, with a poet who is not an objectivist, formalist, postmodernist or surrealist; who does not write a poetry of voice, image, narrative or statement; a poet who does not fit into any camp. . . .

Surely this Philip Booth is a paragon of avoidances. According to Rudman, he has successfully avoided ideology altogether, for he ". . .writes out of the center of his emotional life. . .in the old-fashioned sense, when he has something to say. . . ." Aha, I thought, of course; Mr. Booth is to poetry what Smith-Barney is to the financial world. He writes poetry the old fashioned way; he earns it.

Rudman credits Booth with the ability to utilize a variety of strategies in achieving this styleless style, including the use of "voice, image, narrative [and] statement," though what these things might mean in specific terms is hard to guess. And the lines which Rudman adduces to illustrate Booth's untainted style are far from unfashionable. They are, in fact, recognizable as variants on one of the most pervasive poetic styles of the day: the plainstyle confessional lyric as practiced by hundreds of MFA graduates in hundreds of literary quarterlies:

> I'm rowing
> where measure is lost, I'm barely moving,
> in a circle of translucence that moves with me
> without compass.
> I can't see out or up into;
> I sit facing backwards,
> pulling myself slowly
> toward the life I'm still trying to get at.

The existential crisis described (life is a process without boundaries) is subsumed by an objective correlative (life is like rowing a boat) that is about as subtle as Frost's mending wall or Lowell's skunks. The use of the compass metaphor, the self-reflexive reference to "measure" and the image of rowing backwards to symbolize the speaker's unknown destiny all serve up standard romantic topoi in terms that make "Frost at Midnight" or "Child Roland" seem more like events prepared for Cafe Voltaire. Rudman's contention that such lines are written out of the "center" of the poet's emotional life avoids the fact that they are also written out of the center of a poetic tradition, one that takes as its major premise the illusion of its non-centeredness.

Perhaps Rudman's remarks wouldn't have captured my attention so forcefully had I not read similar things in the prefaces to two recent poetry anthologies that I was considering using for courses. Dave Smith and David Bottoms, in their introduction to *The Morrow Anthology of Younger American Poets* state that their selection is based not upon any fixed guidelines:

> We would include only the poems we liked best;. . .Those we liked had to be interesting, exert an immediate, dramatic presence, possess a character of language that sustained and renewed our attention, and demonstrate a treatment of subject that moved us beyond the subject to an enlarged and resonant awareness of being alive.

In a similar vein, William Heyen in his *The Generation of 2000* makes his editorial principles in similarly democratic terms:

> The poets *2000* brings together are not dadaists or faddists or stand-up comics, and they are not aestheticians tripletalking ethereal voices, but are poets of long-staring at the things of this world.

In other words, to be in these anthologies is to be without stated allegiances, poetics or distinguishing characteristics, to stare for a long time at things without thinking too much about them. To be in these anthologies is to be free of ideology.

Back in the 1950s something of the same concern was voiced by the Left Intelligensia, disillusioned with its own earlier political enthusiasms and ever more fearful of Soviet adventurism in western Europe. It was an era that marked "the end of ideology," as Daniel Bell said, by which he meant the old ideologies of Marxism-Leninism as embodied in the Russian Revolution and the worldwide Socialist movement of the 1930s. It was a period of accommodation and consensus, of conformism and moderation. The social programs of the Roosevelt era gave way to the benign Keynesian calculus of the Eisenhower corporate cabinet. To be free of ideology meant we could exploit and plunder without seeming to serve any particular interests except our own. We could help the little countries wherever we would, keeping them free for growth and development, but certainly not for exploitation. And we could keep our courts, schools and state department free of ideological taint by purging them of anyone who might not feel the same as we do.

Or, to bring things up to date, we could sell arms to whomever will help us raise money to maintain freedom wherever we need to find it. The parallels between the era that produced the Truman doctrine, Marshall Plan and Taft-Hartley Bill and the one that brings us "Gippergate" are so haunting as to cause vertigo, and the newspaper of late has caused much dizziness. If we wanted to characterize the parallels between the two periods we could hardly do better than to adapt the remarks of these anthology editors: we just print what we like; we don't take sides; we have some simple rules; anyone can apply. All we want of our poets is to move us". . .beyond the subject to an enlarged resonant awareness of being alive."

We should know by now that to look long and hard at a subject does not necessarily mean to engage it in any profound way; we should know that the "center of [one's] emotional life" is a construct of late nineteenth-century psychologism, a convenient fiction for those who are trying to escape from history; we should realize, in other words, that the claim of impartiality and detachment is one of the most authoritarian claims we can make—because no one seems to be responsible. When Smith or Heyen invoke their broad, egalitarian principles of inclusion, they fail to read their own anthologies, the contents of which (as Rae Armantrout has rightly pointed out in a *Poetics Journal* review) are about as diverse as cornmeal. And when they speak about "faddists" and "aestheticians," they are using a rather well known rhetorical strategy made popular during the McCarthy era: a small minority of hooligans is

gathering on the outskirts of the poetry community, infiltrating the schools, joining "our" clubs and spreading dangerous diseases around. "We" can't stamp them out, but "We" can refuse to include them in our anthologies.

No doubt these nonaligned poets and editors have in mind someone like Bob Perelman who, after all, has been identified with a certain group of poets (probably those tripletalking "aestheticians") and whose poetry, at least on the surface pays scant attention to an "awareness of being alive." And he certainly is "ideological:"

> Because the languages are enclosed and heated
> each one private a separate way
> of undressing in front of the word window
> faces squashing up against it
> city trees and personal rituals of sanitation
> washing the body free of any monetary transaction
>
> The parts of the machine take off their words and die away
> in a description read to the senses
> by the leftovers on TV that no one would think of eating
> even in the very act of swallowing. (11)

These lines are taken from Bob Perelman's recent book, *The First World* whose subject is the very ideology of the non-ideological that I have been describing. As its title implies, the book's particular subject is the "first" world, the Capitalist (or Communist) superpower whose hegemonic authority creates third and even fourth worlds. Like the editors who simply "print what they like," the first world dispenses largesse in the belief that the state machine will earn its own keep and validate its owner. The owner goes by the name of "We:"

> We have come here today to be plural
> sit in rows or sprawl
> in the wind-tunnel of design competition
> to find out how many a dollar will buy
> eyes focused on the spinning disk, the picture. (15)

And what "We" owns is the language, the means of distribution and dissemination by which self-knowledge may be mediated. In a paradox central to the book, "We" is a construct of the language it owns. It relies on ideas of democracy and pluralism ("We come here today to be plural"), but it lives within a matrix of codes, commands and signals it manipulates in order to gain the illusion of autonomy. It is this informational matrix, drawn from popular media, advertising, political rhetoric and newspapers that provides Perelman with much of his argument.

The book's title refers, as well, to that other first world, our Edenic childhood before the body became a fetish object of drives and fixations, when "the body / with its secret names lies open / like a fresh dug grave to the Almighty / fathered by no one." It is a world before the Oedipus complex, when sexual differentiation and power are lodged not in the phallus or father but in the body as a productive, sensual object. The child is "fathered by no one." In the first world, language is polymorphous and plural, capable of embodying the world without describing it. Like the body, language is desire. But "Tintin grows up to be Claude Levi-Strauss" and Pinocchio becomes "a real boy" thanks to the nurturing influence of an oedipalized history. This narrative is one of commodification, both sexual and linguistic, when in order to achieve individuation, one must channel drives into socially acceptable forms. Or to continue my theme, in order to achieve mental health, one has to "earn" it through good works:

> Next come the Romans, and with them we first see the sky
> artificial creation of scarcity of meaning
> spread out over the proletariat as a visible economic ether.
> You can look, but it costs. (12)

First World investigates the relationship between both meanings of the title: between the political economies of capitalist institutions and the libidinal economies of the Subject. It is a relationship that classical pscyhoanalysis has, until recently, disregarded but which has become the subject of deconstructions of Freud, particularly by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti Oedipus*. Whereas for Freud, neuroses have their seat in the individual psyche and in the "holy family" of father, mother and child, Deleuze and Guattari see schizophrenia as the function (the text?) of a larger social field. By placing all of his emphasis on individual subjectivity and the psychoanalytic cure, Freud replicated the power of the father in the child, hence reinforcing and legitimating the social hierarchy beyond the individual. His French followers and critics would like to liberate sexuality from its prison in the oedipal/psychoanalytic discourse and see it moving freely between the individual and social body.

Freud was well aware that the individual was the product of his language (he had little to say about "her" language except as the expression of hysteria as in the Dora case) and that the unconscious is "spoken" by libidinal drives. Anti-Oedipologists, like Deleuze and Guattari, however, locate the "speaker" of the Subject in social heteroglossia itself in which schizophrenia is the unconscious of social formations. The textualization of the schizophrenic Subject becomes one of Perelman's main concerns:

> I am split, it is written
> parallel lines pressing powerfully together
> Past & present (which came first?)

—one growing more obvious all the time—
went down to the mouth, one fell in and. . .(21)

Perelman's use of the passive voice in the opening line suggests a close relationship between individual psychosis ("I am split") and jurisprudence ("it is written"). These are "parallel lines" insofar as the latter, through its use of the passive voice, may obscure the who does the writing and hence may implicate the former. Or, in other words, schizophrenia is already written in the legal institutions that define it.

Perelman returns to this theme in a later poem that directly invokes Freud on the same topic:

A page is being beaten
back across the face of "things."
Inside me there's a little book of no color, its pages
riffling as I breathe, a moving point, torn out
and I read this scrapbook of desire
let's not say constantly
asleep & provoked by the economics of cliffs, galleys,
cartoons, explosive devices patterned to look like
adults reading signs (34)

The opening line refers to Freud's case, "A Child is Being Beaten" (1919) in which the adult patient uses the passive voice in order to avoid the fact that the child being referred to is himself and that the one doing the beating is his father. Freud uses this case to examine the function of language in psychoanalysis, the way that the patient, through sexual guilt (I deserved this beating—I enjoyed this beating), may avoid naming himself as the recipient of the punishment and naming the father as perpetrator.

Perelman draws attention to the materiality of the language (and to his own activity as a poet) by substituting for "child," the word "page." In a variation on Deleuze and Guattari's "machine of desires," he calls the Subject a "scrapbook of desires," suggesting the degree to which libidinal energies are embodied in specific images, words and signs whose source is the social world of exchange and barter. To read this scrapbook is to suspend one's desire for narrative and accept the flow of partial associations as they appear on the "page" of our sensations. But everywhere "forces outside our control" provide plausible readings of this text:

It's these "very acts" that we must
Pay attention to the flatness of the screen now!
For it's this very flatness
that the frailly projected containment of the humanized body
Is designed to be pinned to
by, naturally, forces outside our control. (11)

Perelman is asking us to see the surface of all sign-producing systems, to observe the "flatness of the screen" that frames our acts and gives them the illusion of inevitability.

The First World is not simply a poeticized version of *Anti-Oedipus*, but it does represent an analogous attempt to create (as Deleuze and Guattari feel Kafka, Artaud and Beckett do) a text at the service of desire, one which acknowledges its own fragmentary, incomplete nature. Perelman does not simply urge us to "Pay attention to the flatness of the screen;" he shatters the screen himself by breaking the linear and logical structure of his own language. If the Oedipus complex is the text of power, then its linguistic equivalent would be the well-made sentence:

> The declarative sentence
> cut
> lash die kill interrogate clear away
> the blood-soaked body
> no longer here the declarative sentence
> would be something other than what it
> says except that "you are what I am"
> is to "the unspoken forces that surround us"
> as "sunlight," see above, is to
> "mental furniture," trashed, sat on
> in state, loved, its wheels licked far into the night
> sirens, thighs, the whole gizmo going off
> or not
> and then why bother. . .(47)

Perelman not only "cuts" the declarative sentence, he links it directly to the "blood-soaked" body that is its receptacle, the sexualized body whose libidinal energies have been coerced into grammatical propositions. A page (or sentence) is truly being beaten. The page becomes the embattled body of the political unconscious.

So what is left? What remains after the death of God, King and declarative sentence? Who was this Oedipus anyway? Did he have a chance to tell his own story, outside of the oracle's (or Freud's) promise? Perelman attempts to answer some of these questions in the book's final poem, a dialogue in which Kreon comes to Oedipus bearing tales of a dying civilization. In order to save it from its "liberal playgrounds / and rightwing communication systems," Kreon says, "God wants you to die." But Oedipus refuses to lose life or eyesight:

> Tell God that my desires are infinite, if unfit
> for human consumption. Sense perception
> is a thing of the past. Myths spill over

into the present. I'm one
with the machines that go boom in the night. (53)

Since he won't die, Kreon asks, perhaps Oedipus will repent? The King is recalcitrant:

You can reprint any of my old speeches
but I doubt God will be able to tell them apart from
anything else ever said.
I think I'll just stand pat.

In Perelman's whimsical version, Oedipus recognizes the degree to which he has become history, validating the law of the Father and the social ethos which that law validates. His speeches about the sickness of society have become those of everyone else. His body has become the text of history which the chorus may mourn to whatever end it wishes: ". . .the past is so addictive, it takes longer and longer. . . / It all turns into a story, like my body . . ." Perelman's Oedipus refuses both sacrificial death and therapeutic sanction. Civilization may no longer use his name to assert its will to power.

The First World is a powerful indictment of various control mechanisms in modern society, performed in language that is both playful and polemical at the same time. It is a political poetry that never thematizes its position in some attempt to gain distance. Rather than providing images of power gone wild, Perelman builds his critique out of the rhetoric that power speaks—a rhetoric so easy to absorb that it takes on the lineaments of "natural speech." Perelman undermines this natural standpoint by employing a supple, constantly-shifting syntactic period and a rich, polyvalent diction:

Now that the Super Bowl is over
and God has come back to life
in the form of a man in a suit on TV
machined to a fineness that a woman rained on in a bender at
Greenham Common
breaking into clauses: that I own the land *which* you do not
because you haven't broken and entered the library
where time gets turned into money *that* grows on
trees *which* tradition says are sticks impregnated
by the systematic force *of* the earth's rotation. . .
Emphases grow thick as history snowballs.
Waves of rage police the objects.

***

In my opening paragraphs I linked (perhaps unfairly) the opinions of

Rudman, Smith and Heyen with considerably darker forces at work in America today. I also generalized their remarks about "faddists" and "stand-up comedians" to apply to Bob Perelman. If my rhetorical gesture is ungainly, it at least acknowledges its own ideological interests. My use of their editorial remarks is an attempt to replace the "passive voice" of contemporary poetry which hides its authoritative (and authoritarian) ideology behind a common sense, disinterested view. It is this view that has been mobilized against any number of literary movements in the past (the history of Modernism is littered with journalistic broadsides against its presumed "cultishness") and which has appeared recently in attacks on "language writing."

Without advocating a return to ideology in the old sense—rigid adherence to literary or party line–I would like to propose the heretical notion that great art occurs not in solitary vigils on mountaintops but in communities of individuals who share common concerns. What certain editors and poets sneeringly call "objectivists" or "dadaists" are those artists who through a certain celebration of their communal interests (and their profound awareness of social malaise) have created works like *Testimony, Spring and All, A, Stanzas in Meditation* and *The First World.* That these works are written within contentious and even insular communities and shared ideologies should not be seen as incidental to their creation. Such works implicitly attack the idea that poetry can ever be disinterested or that the "center of the emotions" can ever be central outside of a profit motive. *The First World* gains its considerable emotional appeal by staying alert to this fact.

—MICHAEL DAVIDSON

SELECTED POEMS BY JOHN ASHBERY
Viking, 349 pp., $22.95

John Ashbery's *Selected Poems*: that forlorn codex, garden of branching paths, termite tree of the late Millennium...The assignment was to review it, and I find I cannot. To review is to have read and to be looking back. I have read *at*, toward, near, but never with that cinching tug of understanding. I have moved my eyes and felt the slow dispersion of my sense of self. I have been flung back into the boredom and rage of childhood, when the whole world seemed to rear up against me, not to be had or understood. I find no sequence, no way of seriously discussing the poems as poems. I can only report on the defensive reflexes that their insistent refusal of meaning triggers in me.

Ashbery cannot be approached as an isolated phenomenon, *sui generis*, though most critics do exactly this. For better or worse, the work is part of a

broader cultural tendency; it belongs with that ground swell opposition against the hierarchies of reason and determinate meaning known as Deconstruction. While Ashbery practices no critical jujitsu himself, he is one of the brethren by temperament. I will explain.

Deconstruction is but the latest development in a process that began early in our century with the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, and which continued (mainly in France) in the movements of structuralism and semiotics. Deconstruction has taken Saussure's premises to a radical extreme. Its thrust, as I understand it, is to demolish the deeply-rooted conceptions of the Enlightenment, presumably so that the culture can evolve in new directions. Deconstruction itself offers no signposts for this evolution, only a method of taking things apart. In this, Deconstructionists are like members of a terrorist sect.

Saussure instigated a revolution in linguistics with his idea of "difference." Briefly, he asserted that words (signs) do not signify by virtue of any relation to a referent, that they do so solely because of their differentiation from other words. Any combination of sounds can mean anything, so long as it is distinct from other combinations. In essence, Saussure divided the closed order of signs from the world.

Deconstructionist thought goes even further. Where Saussure held that the sign was made up of two elements, the signifier (word) and the signified (its meaning), Deconstructionists insist that there is no demonstrable connection between the two; that we can never get past the signifier to find the pure signified. Look up any word in the dictionary–you will not find meanings, only other words. What this leads to is the assertion that meanings are imprecise and unstable, fluid entities that dissolve and coagulate along the so-called "chain of signifiers." The Deconstructionist operation is to unmask any discourse that pretends to clarity and stability. The favored method is to turn logic against itself, to pulverize the ruling assumptions by showing that they rest upon uncertain foundations.

Ashbery is not, as I said, a Deconstructionist. His poetry has nothing to do with this cross-fire of logic. Rather, it moves in the wake of the demolition. Ashbery's lines are what we find after the clear crystal of meaning has been shattered. Many readers, I suspect, fail to understand this and mis-read him. They treat the poems as if they were playfully obscure, but nonetheless part of the project of meaning. No. Ashbery makes a practice of *seeming* to mean while *not meaning*. In the process, he is able to capture many of the sensations that are part of the register of contemporary sensibility. The collapse of meaning in his poetry resonates beautifully with our intuition of larger social collapse. This is obviously an enormous subject and I cannot explore it here. Suffice it to say that sensation, not meaning, is what the poetry is all about.

Ashbery partisans are forever telling me that I lean too hard on that old business of cut-and-dried meaning, that I need to accept that there are innumerable other ways in which language signifies and intimates. That I should, in

other words, loosen up and let the poem work its way with me. I do have a problem with this. For me, verbal reference and linguistic structure are fundamental elements in the rule system of a game called meaning. It is a game—I see that—but by my lights it's the only game in town. I can respond to Dada and Surrealism, but only so long as they are an excitement at the edge of a larger system of coherence. The fact that I link Ashbery with the Deconstructionists, that I see him as temperamentally favoring their pernicious undertaking, forces me to take his procedure seriously. If this makes me a wet blanket, so be it.

Ashbery's poetry is at war with grammatic logic and referential meaning. It sets out to mime—indeed, intensify—that condition of confused unkowing which language evolved to remove us from. Maybe this is why so much of it stimulates in me that all-but-forgotten feelings of early childhood—then, too, the world overran whatever feeble structures I had devised for myself. The poetry is, according to this formulation, tautological to the core: it uses language, by definition an ordering system, to shake the reader loose from order. Ashbery can evoke profound sensation, but the profundity is that of confused emotion and drifting boundaries characteristic of the pre-linguistic psyche.

Ashbery joins the Deconstructionists in believing that linguistic propositions give a false and consoling impression of order, that they organize and whitewash what is essentially flux and foster the illusion of understandability. We string words into sentences and imagine that we have thereby ordered our lives. The poetry tilts at every moment against that illusionistic impulse. It makes use of our grammatic and semantic expectations—much as the Deconstructionists make use of logic—in order to overturn them, to disclose what Ashbery holds to be a larger truth: that we are unanchored, psychically dispersed among a welter of stray sensation and unattainable signification. By staying short of meaning, the poetry becomes, implicitly, a poetry of yearning. Of melancholy.

> There is that sound like the wind
> Forgetting in the branches that means something
> Nobody can translate.

These opening lines of "Summer" are a good example of the procedure. They read as though they ought to mean; they activate the salivary glands of logical expectancy. We believe that if we work at them long enough, the sense will spring loose. But it never does. Break it down: the *sound* (like that of wind forgetting in the branches) means something (that) nobody can translate. The opacity has been very carefully engineered. First, that the sound means something that nobody can translate implies, logically, that meanings can be translated, carried over. They cannot. Meanings are the entities that translation serves: words are translated so that meaning can pass between languages.

Second, the sound is said to be *like* that of wind *forgetting* in the branches. The transitive verb *forget* has been used as an intransitive. Wind, the fundamentally insubstantial movement of the air, has been personified as a consciousness that can forget, that has something *to* forget. This is, undeniably, poetic: forgetting *is* a losing, a leaving behind. An essential perception about wind has been registered. But the promise of revelation that it carries keeps us moving back and forth among the lines—combing them—longer than is warranted. Shuttling back and forth, avid to *get*, we find ourselves driven like squirrels on a wheel—for the nonsensical premise, neither proposition nor metaphor, insures that we will never come to rest at sense.

Try another:

> The concept is interesting: to see, as though reflected
> In streaming windowpanes, the look of others through
> Their own eyes.
>
> — from "Wet Casements"

Here we have not only the logical disjunction—"to see" is not a "concept"—but also the slippery set-up of a comparison which asks us to imagine a *look* reflected in streaming window panes. This is somewhat easier to parse, for we know that a look is registered on a face and that a face can be reflected. But even with this clarification, a logical problem arises. Intended, of course. A look is something that A may give or—if we think of it as appearance itself: "his new look"—manifest, but that only B can see. These lines are finally asking us to imagine A seeing with his own eyes the expression that those eyes are giving out—the effect is Moebius-like.

If the unattainable ideal of linguistic communication is a 1:1 ration between grammatic structure and semantic content, then Ashbery's approach is to tinker with that ratio until it reaches the point at which communication looks possible but is not. The kind of slippage that I have shown as working within the sentence can also be made to work *between* sentences or lines. That is, each individual unit can be said to make, or approximate, sense, but the discourse (poem) itself, governed by semantic, not grammatic, logic, is elusive. Consider the complete poem "We Hesitate":

> The days to come are watershed.
> You have to improve your portrait of God
> To make it plain. It is on the list,
> You and your bodies are on the line.
>
> The new past now unfurls like a great somber hope
> Above the treeline, like a giant's hand
> Placed tentatively on the hurrying clouds.
> The basins come to be full and complex

But it is not enough. Concern and embarrassment
Grow rank. Once they have come home there is no cursing.
Fires disturb the evening. No one can hear the story.
Or sometimes people just forget

Like a child. It took me months
To get that discipline banned, and what is the use,
To ban that. You remain a sane, yet sophisticated, person:
Rooted in twilight, dreaming, a piece of traffic.

I could go over this a hundred times and it would mean nothing more than it does on a first reading. The suggestion of sequence, of a narrative, quickens the semantic desire; the lines resolutely refuse to deliver. We find out neither how the days to come are a watershed, nor what the portrait of God has to do with anything. The two uses of "it" in the third line divide, rather than consolidate possibility. What "line" the bodies are on is never specified, or even suggested. The whole is a slap—and to my mind a not-too-friendly slap—at the reader. Nor is there any point in invoking the surrealist example. This has nothing to do with surrealism. The latter is based upon the transcription of spontaneously recovered, a-logical unconscious materials; this is a calibrated verbal contraption.

Ashbery has a fat magician's bag of devices and tricks, all of which he uses to mock and undermine determinate meaning. It would be no trouble at all to work up an Ashbery "kit," a how-to manual for would-be epigones. Let me list a few of the components and methods:

1) Use definite articles with nouns, *the* not *a*. This conveys the impression that there is a clear context behind the poem, even if no one but the poet knows what that context is. The reader believes that if the other side exists, it can be reached; he keeps trying.

2) Use vague and inclusive pronouns—*we*, *you*, *it*—mixing or "shifting" them frequently. This technique effectively breaks down identity lines, creates the sense that we're all just parts of some large, unbounded consciousness.

3) Construct an indeterminate time-frame. Make something unspecified just to have happened or be about to happen. Useful words: *later*, *before*, *soon*, *always*, *then*...

4) Import the unexpected, jarring word every so often—a word from another language or discourse. This keeps the reader from ever settling in, reminds him that language-worlds are constantly impinging upon each other. Also: unexpected spurts of playful colloquialism—O gosh!—and obvious cliches.

5) Refer knowingly to some place or event, but make sure never to mention it again. The reader needs to realize that the world is always out there, material and inexplicable, and that things just happen. This works well with #1.

6) Confer concrete properties upon abstract or nonexistent entities: "a picture of treason" or "your portrait of God."

7) Finish poems with elusive, important-sounding statements. They should feel like closure. ("In his book there was a picture of treason only / And in the garden, cries and colors.")

8) Repeat procedures from book to book.

As talk-show hosts are wont to say after doing their best to humiliate an audience member: "But hey, folks, this is all just good fun, right?" Well, only in part. I find that the bulk of Ashbery's poetry is formulaic, and that the dross/beauty ratio is weighted dramatically on the side of the dross. Poems like "We Hesitate" far outnumber the gems upon which the reputation has been founded.

But what about those gems? I have said nothing about the instances —lines, passages, whole poems—where Ashbery makes beauty. They certainly exist. The three lines about the wind that I cited earlier, for instance. Though they finally escape the reader, are they not tonally marvelous, themselves the wind? They weave a spell, enlarge our sense of mystery. And the same kind of thing happens again and again in the poems (though often as an isolated passage in an otherwise incomprehensible setting). We feel a blurring of bounds, a subjective liberation from the constraints of order. Nor, to be sure, can we help but project our own intimations and desires onto certain lines.

Listen to the closing section of "As One Put Drunk Into the Packet Boat" and you'll see what I mean:

> The night sheen takes over. A moon of cistercian pallor
> Has climbed to the center of heaven, installed,
> Finally involved with the business of darkness.
> A sigh heaves from all the small things on earth,
> The books, the papers, the old garters and union-suit buttons
> Kept in a white cardboard box somewhere, and all the lower
> Versions of cities flattened under the equalizing night.
> The summer demands and takes away too much,
> But night, the reserved, the reticent, gives more than it takes.

This, I think, is as good as Ashbery gets. While the lines cannot be corralled into meaning, they do nudge the sensibility toward contemplation. They make a music that feels like significance. We can enjoy the word-sounds, and the tranquil, almost weary rhythm. The "moon of cistercian pallor" delights, as does Ashbery's use of words like "installed" and "business"—the re-contextualizing works to freshen the language. Alas, this passage is more the exception than the rule. More often then not, the reader gets non sequitur, the portentous and obviously contrived proclamation; he experiences over and over the frustrations of narrative *interruptus*.

The cliche among Ashbery exegetes is that the poems reproduce the "logic"—or flow—of dreams, that they bathe us in an effluvium of primary sensation. And truly, when a poem does work, we are sent paddling into a Heraclitan flux, a dark Heideggarian "Being" wherein we can never lodge, but only recognize ourselves as en route *toward*. However playful the work may at times appear, it is implicitly frightening, for—as in Heideggarian philosophy—that *toward* is always *toward death*. The gathering surge of confusion only breaks there, if it breaks at all.

I won't deny that Ashbery's poetry at times has this effect, and that when it does it affects me deeply. Nor will I pretend that there are no uses or pleasures in a poetry that mimics the dispersal of meaning that I feel all too often as an inescapable part of the contemporary condition. But I cannot on this account turn from another, more philosophic concern. Simply: that this is an enterprise that repudiates sense and mocks our faith in the sufficiency of our language structures. It turns against the word in its attempt to uncover the undistilled feelings and sensations that are behind it. In a sense, Ashbery's poetry works backward along the evolutionary spiral, undoing. Granted, this might be necessary. Maybe it's true that, as creatures of meaning, we are at a historical dead-end, unable to see past the regress of our rational constructions. Ashbery is staking himself on a wager. If another way exists, then demolition might be in order, and his work will be seen as a pioneering move in that direction. But if there is not another way, if we have made ourselves the best, the only, tool, then the poetry will prove to have been a dead-end —interesting, at times beguiling, ultimately nihilistic.

—SVEN BIRKERTS

FOUR RESPONSES TO BIRKERTS

1) ELIOT WEINBERGER

Our venerable editor has asked the members of the *Sulfur* masthead to respond: The conjunction, in this same issue, of a large batch of new Ashbery poems and the Birkerts review might seem, to some, schizophrenic. Further responses, it is hoped, will lead us back to plurality.

It's an interesting question: Does a magazine exist purely to promote its contributors, or should it allow an intelligent attack? Elsewhere, such articles are normally rejected. Occasionally they are printed, flagged with an editor's

note inviting reader comment—a smarmy way of playing both sides at once. Even this, less public, invitation, strikes me as timid. By now it should be evident that *Sulfur* is a place where none of its editors, let alone all the contributors, agree on very much. (Even Helen Vendler has been praised, however faintly, in a recent issue). In the present case, Ashbery is not a young poet nor this any early review: the piece may annoy him personally, but it will hardly sink the work. It should be expected, in a magazine called *Sulfur*, that some of the hundred flowers will smell less sweet. Why not let the hundred schools contend?

Nevertheless, what I find remarkable about Birkerts' piece is its willful ignorance of much of the century, including, most obviously, French poetry. He writes as though Apollinaire and Reverdy, Larbaud and Roussel, Breton, Jacob, Soupault and Char had never existed, or that Ashbery had never read them. His dichotomy of surrealism ("the transcription of spontaneously recovered, a-logical unconscious materials") and Ashbery ("a calibrated verbal contraption") is false. Despite various claims for the former, the surrealists were clearly, like all poets, constructing the latter. And Birkerts' isolated praise of Ashbery (the poems "weave a spell, enlarge our sense of mystery. . .we feel a blurring of bounds, a subjective liberation from the constraints of order") has been equally applied to the surrealists. Surely one of the important developments of poetry in this century (and particularly in America since the Second World War) is a true internationalism, unseen since the European late Middle Ages. At its worst, it has produced imitators: the American bad Eastern European poet, the South American bad beatnik poet, the Chinese bad imagist. At its best we are seeing legitimate heirs who are transforming the tradition, while working in another language. To my mind, two of the most interesting French poets happen to write in English: Ashbery and Michael Palmer. That this may strike some as an insult is a result of the continuing mesmerizing effect of Williams' nationalistic jingoism: "American speech." [Everyday American was a language occasionally employed by Williams, only parodically by Pound and Zukofsky, and almost never by H.D., Moore, Stevens, Crane, Oppen, Reznikoff, Olson, et al. Interestingly, it's main practitioners—Fearing, Rakosi, Hughes, Blackburn, Baraka—are considered "minor" poets.]

Furthermore, Birkerts seems strangely oblivious to some recent developments. He should spend an afternoon in the deep shade of *In the American Tree*: Ashbery will seem a fountain of light. After all, an Ashbery poem has an unmistakable (however "impersonal) *voice*—a major verboten in language-land—and an unmistakable atmosphere of oneiric melancholia. I have trouble following Birkerts' exasperation: the passages he quotes seem perfectly comprehensible to me. Perhaps, like many critics, Birkerts is too smart. (Or perhaps, like many readers, I've become stupefied from watching too many flocks of untethered signifiers).

What Birkerts doesn't discuss is the apparent impetus for his piece: Ashbery's extraordinary reputation. That Ashbery has become the most heavily

laureled American poet since Lowell, rather than remaining an idiosyncratic worker with a cult following (like, say, Jack Spicer) is unfathomable. It is one of the two little mysteries of contemporary American poetry. [The other is: on what basis are poems accepted or rejected by *APR, Antaeus, The Nation, The New Yorker*, national prizes, etc.? How do they tell the difference?] Calling out the deconstructionists, as Birkerts does, doesn't help: they have made each other's reputations, not those of any writer, and Ashbery would have existed without them. I have no answer; I doubt Ashbery himself could explain; it's one of those things.

Finally, I find Birkerts' version of the growth of language, both in the individual and in the species, unconvincing. There is no "condition of confused unknowing" before language, for there is no species without a language and there is only one confused species. Language did not "evolve to remove us from" confusion: it put us there. (One of the mutations, poetry, sometimes gets us out.) As for the individual, it seems to me that language is acquired more in delight and play than out of frustration, and further, that the world is only as complex as one's language. One must have a sophisticated language to invent meaninglessness, and I'm surprised that the baby Birkerts yearned for meaning, and felt that "the world overran" his grasp of it. I'll take his word on it, but I suspect that such highchair existentialism is quite rare.

2) CLARK COOLIDGE

I can see no generative value in a review which immediately announces that its author can find "no way of seriously discussing the poems as poems," and so can only report on his "defensive reflexes." But if one does read beyond this point, and I doubt that I would have if I had not been asked by Clayton for my response, it comes as no surprise that the piece is of no use in approaching/investigating Ashbery's work. And I don't think I'm wrong in presuming some inclination to such involvement on the part of Sulfur's readership.

It is hard to seriously consider the comments of someone who has not at least *entered* the work, who in fact seems afraid to do so. Birkerts stands resolutely outside, waving his closed volumes of Saussure and (unnamed) contemporary Deconstructionist texts like storm warnings. His is the conservative position, a refusal to enter into any process that he cannot be previously be sure of, that he finds he cannot explicate with the aid of extant rationally-defensible judgements. But the poetic (and not alone Ashbery's) process resists such surety; it *is* an adventure of flux and transformation. And he should know that such qualities are not to be found only in the poems of recent times.

Poetry is never a matter of agreed-upon points perfectly set out and colored for smooth reception and then defended. There is too much motion and polyvalent meaning in its turnings for certainties of static knowing. If meanings were not "imprecise and unstable, fluid entities," poets would be unable to work at all. Poetry is not just another method of knowing the world.

Ashbery is a poet whose work is better exemplified in the particular arrangements of his successive volumes than in the separate appearances of his poems in magazines or in the whittled-down nature of a Selected Poems. Birkerts shows no evidence of prior experience with these initial volumes. He does not appear to have been there.

The piece is disappointing (if not infuriating), and not just in Ashbery's regard but re the whole poetic pursuit. It reveals a too familiar misapprehension of the poet as one who (also) stands outside his project selecting from a "bag of devices and tricks" preparing the construction of a predetermined structure ("a calibrated verbal contraption"). This is a *basic* error, and one that has long kept many a reader from active involvement with poems. An error that looks to be the product of fear. Fear of "dispersion of my sense of self" (where is it written that a poet must take pains to shore up any reader's identity?). Fear of any "opposition against the hierarchies of reason" (the phrasing echoes Norman Podhoretz's defensive and condescending attacks on Kerouac and Ginsberg in the late Fifties). Fear of "narrative *interruptus*" (poetry again wrongly evaluated by fiction's standards). Fear of any sort of poetic motion, since in Birkerts' goal-oriented nightmare, motion is always "toward," and "that *toward* is always *toward death.*" Not surprisingly, he rejects any mature involvement with the "drifting boundaries characteristic of the pre-linguistic psyche."

Poetry always requires of its readers some daring, lest readers and poets alike be stuck with illustrations of what they know all too well, decorations of the established culture. And a fair amount of poetry's impetus *is* rebellion against whatever current standard.

It is notable that the term "meaning," when used to dam the flow of a poetry, is always found in the singular (the definite article seems to lurk around this use of the term). But any move away from such defended language pockets as Birkerts', immediately shows that meaning is *never* singular in the workings of poetry. There is not only one thing.

And Birkerts' list of the methods Ashbery is supposed to have used "to mock and undermine determinate meaning" is nothing but a cheap shot. How can there be anything intrinsically fraudulent about procedures used (or, perhaps better, materials encountered and dealt with) by poets of all ages, not just our supposedly "Deconstructionist" one? Birkerts' remark on the use of pronouns suggests that what he most requires in a poem is an "I" (or perhaps a "he")

that he can easily seat his skeptical self within and ride unthreatened, no matter what might intrude amidst the poem's "garden of branching paths."

There is an irresponsible follow-game in which Ashbery is made somehow responsible for the scholastic establishment's use of him. Birkerts falls into this trap, shunting aside the material qualities (and viable questions raised by) Ashbery's work. The notion that scholastic enthusiasms set the tone for the *writing* of poems is anyway a distortive one. Instead of tilting at Ashbery as a Deconstructionist "brethren by temperament," he might more usefully have considered the connections with other artists that Ashbery has himself cited as influential. Such names as Auden, Berio, Webern, Robert Wilson, Raymond Roussel, DeKooning, Cowper and Maurice Sceve appear in what is already a various and fascinating list.

And if I seem to be echoing the first European's "proof" of Niagara Falls' existence ("Because I was there and I saw it"), so be it. But 25 years of involvement with Ashbery's poems stands me incredulous before Birkerts' judgement that the work "repudiates sense." Is not its more apparent effect the enrichment of sense, the enlargement of meaningful possibility? Birkerts is simply wrong on this point, tripped up by his desire for a separable and dominant meaning in any poem. Anyone who worries so about the besieged condition of "faith in the sufficiency of our language structures" must have a shallow experience of verbal art. And his fear of "slippage" reminds me of a writing by DeKooning (1960) which *could* be useful in approaching such a poetry as Ashbery's:

> "Y'know the real world, this so-called real world,
> Is just something you put up with, like everybody else.
> I'm in my element when I am a little bit out of this world:
> then I'm in the real world—I'm on the beam.
> Because I'm falling, I'm doing all right;
> when I'm slipping, I say, hey, this is interesting!
> It's when I'm standing upright that bothers me:
> I'm not doing so good; I'm stiff.
> As a matter of fact, I'm really slipping, most of the time,
> into that glimpse. I'm like a slipping glimpser."

Any commentator on Ashbery's work must be fascinated and willing enough to unclench his knowledge and *move* with the words, gather on the fly, otherwise his remarks will be more than wrongheaded, they will not apply.

But by the end Birkerts has even managed to confuse poetry with discourse (to the detriment of poetry, of course). Poets seem to have been screaming this distinction from the beginning of the art, still unheard by those with a main stake in the supremacy of rationalism uber alles. The best claim Birkerts can

make for the value of poetry seems to be that it "freshens the language," which language will them presumably be better able to get on with its "real" business, that of rational inquiry and its conservation.

And it's interesting (if dispiriting) that while somewhere in the midst of the piece he begins to mean "the poetry" to stand for Ashbery's poetry, by the end, when he says "the poetry will prove to have been a dead-end" I begin to hear him as meaning *all* poetry. As if he secretly prays for its soon demise.

3) MICHAEL PALMER

There is a certain futility in trying to respond to an article as diffuse and pointless as Birkerts'. He seems to want his meaning the old-fashioned, tried and true way, of that time when meaning was meaning and we all knew what that meant. This was before the narratives came apart and we actually learned what such meanings meant. Would we like not to have learned? Would we like to forget that we learned? Is there anything that any of us have learned?

Mr. Birkerts misses the "cinching tug of understanding," his "sense of self" has become dispersed, and this has put him in something of a snit. The "pleasures of poetry" (serious pleasures, of course) would appear to be missing, the Arnoldean consensus has been withdrawn, and the Citadel of Reason is under attack. The easy chair in the study has caught fire and worse, this has occurred during Mr. Birkerts' nap. Mr. Birkerts has a vague sense—very vague—that the League of Hashisheem Deconstructionists is guilty of arson at the instigation of that aged mullah, the notorious F. de Saussure, *professeur-assassin*. Ashbery, while not of their number, has followed in their wake, approvingly examining the ruins and creating amid them a poetry of spurious sensation. A seeming that is not meaning. An unmeaning which threatens to cause Mr. Birkerts to regress all the way back to the confusions of childhood, before Mr. Birkerts' structures of comprehension were fully in place. The dread matrix:

ratara ratara ratara
atara tatara rana
otara otara katara
otara ratara kana

The poem does not parse. It does not deliver its story. It is not behaving like a responsible member of the linguistic community. It "mocks our faith in the

sufficiency of our language structures." "Faith," my dictionary offers, "unquestioning belief that does not require proof or evidence." So the faith, above all, must be kept, since it rests on nothing. Yet we are told, by one who is keeping the faith, that it is Ashbery's work that rests on nothing, that it is "nihilistic." This last is the all-too-familiar whine of the bourgeois subject, threatened with the loss of its delights, its constituted meanings and its empty identity.

4) JED RASULA

"Deconstruction" has become the current intellectual shorthand for whatever seems destabilizing, threatening, or insoluble in textual rhetoric in virtually any genre. It's because Sven Birkerts so glibly runs through a version (undernourished, to say the least) of deconstruction that it's worth responding to his critique of Ashbery; by linking Ashbery conceptually to deconstruction, Birkerts pretends to a more compelling case than his actual reading of Ashbery's poetry can sustain (his "reading" is most eloquently put in his opening paragraph, where he admits the frustration of being reduced to the "boredom and rage of childhood"—a point from which his childish analysis of texts is unable to recuperate). I take Birkerts' argument to be typical of a particular species of complaint leveled not only at Ashbery, but also at Gertrude Stein, Louis Zukofsky or, for that matter, T.S. Eliot. I have to think back to the characterizations of "The Waste Land" as a mockery—to use Birkerts' term—in order to contextualize Birkerts in a long line of Anglo-American petitioners for sanity, progress, clarity, stability and reliability in verse. For that matter, why not five-year warrantees or a mileage guarantee! What does the man want from poetry?—serviceability? Efficiency? To speak of Ashbery's poetry as "an enterprise that repudiates sense and mocks our faith in the sufficiency of our language structures," "a fat magician's bag of devices and tricks. . .to mock and undermine determinate meaning,"—this is testimony perhaps to Ashbery's power to bewitch a reader, not by vacating meaning and mocking anybody but by mobilizing a superabundance of sense, both common (Birkerts' 4th category: cliches and colloquialisms) and uncommon (shifting pronouns, indeterminate time-frames, and concretized or personified abstract categories: Birkerts' 2nd, 3rd and 6th "components"). To choose to speak of these devices as a mockery, however, is irresponsible and insulting: the Ku Klux Klan favors strategies of mockery, and in a different way, so does the Ayatollah Khomeini. If there is a mockery in Ashbery, it is there only insofar as it is embodied in B-movie dialogue, advertising pitches, and technocratic jargon

which forms part of the verbal fabric of his language and which Ashbery himself can hardly be reproached for creating; if anything, his work might be read as a deconstruction—there's that word again—of these and other unreflective "jargons of authenticity" that are the real pulverizing activities of American culture.

It's at this point that Birkerts has to be taken as indicative of the need to try to blame something on deconstruction—a discernible need that crops up repeatedly in various journals and discussions. Deconstruction has been called a "serene linguistic nihilism" (Geoffrey Thurley, who claims in the same sentence that this *also* characterizes the aesthetics of the Black Mountain school [*Counter-Modernism in Current Critical Theory*, p. 185]), an "elaborate intellectual audacity" (Edward Said) and—more to the point—"the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text." (Barbara Johnson). Instant characterizations can be irresponsibly uninformed or momentarily arresting, but either way the actual activity of "deconstruction" eludes easy characterization. And I would argue that this is precisely why it has generated turmoil and confusion—for in the positivist atmosphere of academic *and* popular press discussions of such issues in the U.S., anything that can't be pegged in a phrase or two (billboard length) is immediately subjected to a kind of semantic open-season. This is the genuine nihilism: not that deconstruction actually maintains that "everything is meaningful, nothing is meant" (Dan Sperber), but critics of deconstruction claim that this is the case *in order to be able to say anything* about deconstruction itself.

The first and most significant point to be made about "deconstruction" is that it is a specific strategy articulated within the work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida; as Jonathan Culler says, it is "a strategy within philosophy and a strategy for dealing with philosophy," aspiring to be "both rigorous argument within philosophy and displacement of philosophical categories or philosophical attempts at mastery." (*On Deconstruction*, p. 85). Properly, deconstruction should refer strictly to Derrida's own methods of reading texts. It's too late for that now: critics at Yale and increasingly around the country have appropriated the rhetoric of deconstruction in order to liberate literary criticism from its "service function" of subservience to so-called literary works, creative writing. And what is this rhetorical move? I quote Geoffrey Hartman: ". . .to suggest that meaning and language do not coincide, and to draw from that noncoincidence a peculiar strength, is merely to restate what literature has always revealed." (*Deconstruction and Criticism*, p. viii). Birkerts' account of deconstruction is predicated on the first half of Hartman's formulation, without benefit of the extremely relevant reminder that whatever we call literature has always worked within—and has been enabled by—this recognition.

"Derrida wants us to see—if not to understand—that so long as we believe that language is mainly a representation of something else, we cannot

see what language does. . ." (Edward Said, *The World, The Text, and the Critic*, p. 201). Bluntly: deconstruction is *seeing what language does*. At this level, certainly, Ashbery can be linked with deconstruction, for his work is an exploration in seeing what language does. Birkerts wants language only to stand still and mean something. This is what a stop sign does (but not even the language on the sign stays still: to a hypothetical speaker of English completely ignorant of the traffic system, for instance, what could "STOP" possibly mean? Stop what? Who? Why?). Birkerts says Ashbery's poetry seems "to mean while *not meaning*," by "staying short of meaning" it is "at war with grammatic logic and referential meaning," and that it therefore "belongs with that groundswell opposition against the hierarchies of reason and determinate meaning known as Deconstruction." *Meaning* is Birkerts' favorite term and guiding concept. For him, words mean what they mean and to toy with meaning is to mock. But meaning (versus meaningless) is not the issue in either deconstruction or Ashbery. Birkerts does manage to see that "sensation, not meaning, is what the poetry is all about." I would suggest a reformulation: the *sensation of meaning* is what the poetry is "about." Again, to reproach Ashbery for not electing to write a spare, object-laden, plain-speech American pragmatist poetry on the order of Gary Snyder is like complaining that a horse lacks antlers.

Culler asks a very pertinent question in *On Deconstruction* which is to the point of Ashbery's work—particularly his "insistent refusal of meaning" as Birkerts has it: "what is at stake in the claim that meaning is whatever is present in the reader's experience or in the notion that the end of reading is to make the reading self present to itself?" (p. 82) I would suggest that Ashbery's work—more than any other now being written in English—continually folds the force of this question into its motivation. His work has come into a certain vogue in academia, I suspect, because it forces its reader to confront the same issues deconstruction does. But as I said earlier, "deconstruction" is now a loose shorthand. We need to separate Birkerts' Ashbery from Birkerts' lip-serviced Deconstruction—not because Birkerts links them, but because his link is not uncommon. The Marxist critic Terry Eagleton cautions us on the unreflecting American absorption of continental theory, suggesting that here "deconstruction rejoins traditional liberal humanism, whose serene indulgence of its own befuddlement was always an unmistakable sign of the privilege of those who can afford not to know." (*The Function of Criticism*, p. 103). Birkerts' review is simply the latest instance of indulgent befuddlement—but in his case, without serenity.

DÉYÉ MÒN, GIN MÒN

(Behind the mountains, there are more mountains.)
— Créole proverb

After the recent uprisings in Haiti, *The New York Times* ran a front page article headlined, "Voodoo Under Attack in Post-Duvalier Haiti" (May 15, 1986). Characterizing the recent popular revolt as a "religious war," *The Times* linked cult objects and "superstitions" to the old Duvalier regime. Baptist radio broadcasts calling Voodoo a national curse were tied to the mob-killings of some 24 people in the towns of Pegnon and St. Raphael. The article quoted the Baptist Reverend Delouis Louis as saying, "The sorcerers make money by making people sick. . . .The time of voodoo is over."

It's this sort of perspective that Wade Davis identifies in "The Serpent and The Rainbow" (Simon & Schuster, 1985) as typical of Hollywood's early take on zombis. The underlying message to the North American audience, Davis writes, is that "any country where such abominations took place could find its salvation only through military occupation." So, you might expect Davis' book—widely hailed as one of last year's best volumes of popular anthropology—to shed some light on Voodoo's present situation. It doesn't. By researching the scientific basis for zombis, Davis pretends to reveal the secrets of Haiti's national religion. But by studiously avoiding analysis of what might be called Voodoo economics, he, instead, merely updates the zombi pot-boiler. In the end, what's interesting about "The Serpent and The Rainbow" is how it, like our "newspaper of record," arranges the facts about Haiti in order to give us yet another version of "Raiders of the Lost Ark."

Voodoo has had a political role since Haiti's earliest colonial history. Discovered by Columbus in 1492, in the 1520s the French colony started importing Africans. By 1791, Haiti's population was made up of 40,000 whites, 28,000 mulatto, and 450,000 slaves. These blacks were taken from West Africa where, Davis points out, the Efik tribe had a secret society that was very similar to Voodoo. But the various deities, ceremonies, and the social hierarchy of Voodoo came from a mixing of West African, Catholic, and New World beliefs. Voodoo became as much a lingua franca among slaves as Créole.

By 1789, the island's exports outstripped all 13 colonies of North America combined. In order to maintain this volume of (mostly) sugar production, it is estimated that the equivalent of Haiti's entire population of blacks had to be replaced every 20 years. Thousands died from over-work and disease, and many escaped into the hills. In 1788, out of some 10,000 slaves loaded at the port of Cap Francis, more than 2,000 got away.

It was among these escapees, or Maroons, that Haiti's first revolution began, reportedly with a huge Voodoo ceremony. Led by Toussaint L'Overture, the Maroons joined the slaves to fight off the cream of Napoleon's army and, in 1804, declared the island the first independent black republic.

But Haiti continued to be divided along religious, economic, and racial lines. At the time of the revolution, the more middle-class and urban mulatto population controlled a third of the plantations. Catholicism allied this group with the white middle-class in the main city of Port-au-Prince. Although now more native, a ruling minority continued to absorb most of the country's wealth.

A nation of slaves became a nation of starving farmers. With the promised redistribution of land, coffee replaced sugar as the national crop, because it could be grown in the smaller, hillier plots being carved out of the jungle. But the denuding of the landscape led to less rainfall and more erosion, in a cycle that left the island with 70% of its population engaged in subsistence agriculture. It is among these rural poor that Voodoo has survived.

With the advent of World War I, Haiti—its own land largely useless—began its role as supplier of cheap labor to countries like Cuba and Dominique. Among other repercussions, this exodus "solved" some of Haiti's tremendous economic, social and political problems by exporting them. Then, in July 1915, citing Haiti's instability and strategic importance, the U.S. Marines landed. They would occupy the country until August, 1934.

According to the Latin American Bureau's study of 1985, "Haiti: Family Business," one of the results of the occupation was that the predominantly Southern and white Marine commanders tended to put lighter skinned mulattoes into positions of power. The reaction of the black elite was to form the "Noiriste" movement which emphasized Haiti's African links and reaffirmed Voodoo. It was from this movement, led by intellectuals from Port-au-Prince and supported by the rural poor, that François "Papa Doc" Duvalier gained power.

Duvalier ran as an anti-U.S. candidate for President. Many of his campaign headquarters in the 1957 election were in Voodoo temples, and his victory was a triumph for the uneducated and the poor. Once in office, Duvalier strengthened his ties to Voodoo not only by elevating its priests (bocors or houngans) to power, but by deliberately dressing like the Voodoo saint Baron Samedi in black rimmed glasses, a dark suit and narrow ties. In order to counter the destabilizing force of the army, Duvalier established his own private army of 9,000—the Ton Ton Macoutes—who were often recruited from the unofficial Voodoo enforcement network called the Bizango.

So, in a sense, Duvalier's reign was a culmination of a process: absorbing Voodoo into Haiti's political and economic battles and aligning it with nationalism, anti-Americanism, anti-Communism, and, in the form of the Ton Ton Macoutes, terror. Estimates of the number killed under François Duvalier run to 50,000.

"The Serpent and The Rainbow" never investigates this side of Duvalierism or the economics of Voodoo. Its historical analysis ends abruptly just as Papa Doc gains power. The book's melodramatic plot begins with Davis being called by a mysterious sponsor to investigate the reappearance of Clairvius Narcisse—a Haitian who had been pronounced dead and buried 20 years earlier. Davis' job is to discover the chemical formula that explains this zombi

phenomenon. To reassure us, our guide identifies his perspective early on. "Of course, no scientist would believe," he writes, "that there is a direct causal relationship between the death of the victim and, for example, the physical act of pointing bone."

Having established his background as an ethnobotanist at Harvard, Davis begins his investigation with the requisite "faint premonition of horror," and a love for the "exotic." He shows little concern for the motives of the group of aging backers who are financing his trip. Maybe they want the scientific benefits of the zombi "anaesthesia," or maybe it's to "make somebody a lot of money." Either way, these self-defined "old friends" of Papa Doc pay all expenses, and Davis' interest in causal relationships seems to disappear. With Broadway producer David Merrick as one of the primary financial backers, you can almost hear the book's formula falling into place as Davis calculates the eventual media tie-ins.

The pursuit of the zombi drug leads Davis to Herard Simon who is the central anthropological source in "The Serpent and The Rainbow." Davis describes Simon as a "deeply religious man, a theologian really. . .beneath (his corpulence) there was something at once terribly wise and terribly savage, like the soul of a man who was forced to kill. . . ." Simon turn out to be not only a powerful houngan and devout supporter of Duvalier, but head of the Ton Ton Macoutes for one-fifth of the country. That fact might have called Simon's information into question and, at the same time, helped explain the killing he was "forced" to do, but Davis passes over it. He expresses only the slightest doubt when Simon reveals his Duvalierist view of foreign affairs: "The Jews sent you because they won't do the work. And who will make the money?" "The Serpent and The Rainbow" never wavers from its characterization of the Duvalier revolution as "often misrepresented in the Western press" and "remembered only for its later brutal excesses."

Although he never specifies, perhaps Davis means the excesses that have made Haiti one of the 25 poorest countries in the world. The annual per capita income is $315 (all figures in U.S. dollars) and in the back country, where Voodoo is strongest, it's $50 a person. 78% of the rural population lives at or below the absolute poverty level. In 1982, 80% of the population was illiterate. As Davis walked what he calls "the dirty, lively, gaudy boulevards" of Port-au-Prince, the infant mortality rate was 130 per 1000 (ten times the U.S. figure). What medical attention there had been under the Duvalier regime (which spent less than $4 a person) went to Port-au-Prince, leaving almost all rural medicine to the bocors.

It's impossible to separate Voodoo from this extreme poverty in which it operates. Yet, when Davis is told that Narcisse was made a zombi in part for appropriating family land, he doesn't mention that over 70% of Haiti has been rendered unsuitable for farming or that the State multiplies this economic pressure by being the single largest single landowner.

The Haiti Davis researched is little more than a U.S. colony. The government offers North American corporations a ten year "tax holiday" for setting

up plants in Port-au-Prince, where the minimum wage is $3 a day. Meanwhile, some 3,000 families have been earning over $90,000 a year, and the Duvalier regime—for all its use of anti-American rhetoric—has been a study in how to keep this economic stranglehold intact. In 1971, when Duvalier died, his son Jean-Claude assumed the Presidency-For-Life in a ceremony similar to the houngan's passing on of Voodoo authority. The Haitian government continued to swing with the policy shifts in Washington. Three weeks after Reagan's election, Baby Doc authorized more than 100 arrests of journalists and independent politicians. At the same time, he appropriated some $20 million from national funds for his personal use.

At one point, Davis admits that his investigation is "in effect asking who actually ruled rural Haiti." The obvious answer is Herard Simon and his ilk. Described in *The Times'* article as "one of the most powerful men of Haiti's central plateau," it seems more than coincidental that Simon is both a source for the paper's description of religious wars and Davis' anthropology. To *The Times*, Simon doesn't mention his loyalty to Duvalier as a "saviour," the use of Voodoo temples as Ton Ton Macoutes headquarters, or the source of his own wealth. Instead, he defends himself by arguing, "They say we are devils, that we collaborated with Duvalier. Catholic bishops always say the Te Deum for Duvalier. Are they killed, are their churches attacked?"

Because "The Serpent and The Rainbow"'s historical discussion stops with Papa Doc, it's no help in evaluating this Duvalierist strategy of defending yourself by muddying the religious, economic and political. Nor does it help in understanding Voodoo's present position under the U.S.-backed military government. As the religion of the majority of Haitians, Voodoo continues to be one of the only functioning social networks in present-day Haiti. But through Duvalier's melding of the Bizango with the Ton Ton Macoutes, it's been tarred with the old repression. Thus, in recent uprisings, the Catholic church has been able to usurp the role of the liberating theology. Although Voodoo maintains its strength among the rural farmers, the U.S. demand for cheap labor is urbanizing the population. This further isolates Voodoo and provides opportunities for Christian proselytizing among the newly created factory workers.

It's the impact of poverty and governmental greed that's missing from "The Serpent and The Rainbow," and without it, Voodoo remains a mysterious religion with no relationship to the hardship around it. This mystery perfectly suits Davis' needs. Even as he uncovers some of Voodoo's secrets, his role as great white truth-hunter demands that the Haitian religion maintain its allure of dark impenetrability. While Davis was supposedly uncovering the causes of the "living dead," Haiti was trying to rise from the throes of a kind of national zombiism: a trance-like state brought on by almost unbelievable corruption, hunger and disease. Davis' obfuscation of these facts is matched by those of his pro-Duvalier, anthropological sources. In both cases, they play into the hands of U.S. foreign policy whose "voodoo economics" exert no more mysterious a hold over the Haitian people than that of slavery.

Note

One of "The Serpent and The Rainbow"'s accomplishments is an extensive, if not very well organized, bibliography. For those interested in learning more about Voodoo, there are a few invaluable books in print.

Zora Neale Hurston's "Tell My Horse" (Turtle Island) was first published in 1938 but holds up well as a not very scientific but highly humanistic look at Haitian religion. What Hurston lacks in hard data, she makes up for with a fine ear and eye and the unique perspective of a black American with a working knowledge of Voodoo's active role in the American deep South.

Maya Deren's "Divine Horsemen" (Documentext) is a 1953 report on her film-making trip to Haiti. With an introduction by Joseph Campbell, the book is a serious piece of amateur anthropology marked by a deep involvement with the Haitian people and culminating in what amounts to the author's conversion. Deren's Voodoo documentary, also called "Divine Horsemen," is available for rent and is well worth catching.

Robert Ferris Thompson's "Flash of the Spirit" (Random House) shows the links between West African, Haitian and North American religious beliefs. But for a general introduction, Alfred Métraux's "Voodoo in Haiti" (Schocken) remains the most reliable and interesting, even 25 years since its first printing. Métraux doesn't pretend to be all-inclusive (a fault of Milo Rigaud's "Secrets of Voodoo" recently reissued by City Lights) but combines anecdote with an overview of both the history and uses of the Haitian religion. His analysis of the interaction between Voodoo and Christianity helps illuminate the conflict going on in Haiti today.

—DANIEL WOLFF

NORTHERN SUMMER: NEW & SELECTED POEMS 1963-1983/JOHN MATTHIAS

These incorporations of Rolls books and Ascham, primary documents, are pretty—especially with little two-liners framed by space, indented—but not wonderfully resayable like something from the *Golden Treasury*. So I conclude, in spite of the very many violences and intensities, that these are lovely by exclusion, that the art here is tact. Perhaps it's a feeling I get that the author, who "makes no attempt to explain fundamentals," is too proud of plums on his thumb. He votes for brightness falling from the *hair* (I don't), taking part in that old controversy, and maybe it's too many of these public cruxes getting in, the matter of schoolrooms, that has me wanting to question the authenticity or (ultimate) freshness of his relation to research. His

braver verse shapes, learned from Pound, Olson, I think Zukofsky, originally held quirky finds and one-man fads, and I come to miss their aboriginal oddity here. But a pleasure ("East Anglian Poem") to see the effects again, these timed remarks, these throwaways producing somehow, unexpectedly, a Yeatsian sweetness as if a sensibility bled into by Gilbert White's. It *sounds*, that's to say, like politics and flow grasped but the field's a window and contemplation enough. There's nothing we can do now. "Epilogue for a New Home" is a good poem because these work in it honestly to produce it. Where it doesn't work is (for example) the late poem on Karl Wallenda, which imagines the provider of spectacle as acquiring an inner life as he falls.

Is "You measure John" a good poem, wife Diana measuring Augustus Johns in the Fitzwilliam, loathing them?

> It is an old story:
> some man damages the lives of women
> who would love him.
> There are various excuses.
> One is art.

Here you have his direct address, intimate, Chandleresque. One wants to *forgive* it. So, of course, I thinks it's a trick. He'll address dead people too, and ask them questions (as he does Wallenda), like involving aunt in the conversation. And this international style:

> 1667. And on Landguard beach, 1000 Dutch.
> That was the last invasion.
> Afterwards, 1753-66,
> Governor Thicknesse, thank you, defending, sir.
> (And plenty of out-of-work sailors)

behind which are Pound gists and Olson one-liners (and no discussion). The flint-knapper poem pleases, as Woolf's slighter sketches of minor figures do; this is a relaxed kind of reading. The Berryman poem ("For John, After His Visit") stays with me as more, and a vindication of this method, heaped detail, when the details are known to Matthias. Religion makes a bridge ("26 June 1381/1977") and see the end of that one's commas, almost, working. So many trips to England gave him the student Marxist line early (not to adopt, but as common coin) and it vibrating against his midwest sensitivities was pure gain. His best about writing poems is "Poem for Cynouai," too sensitive at one point to the mass of good poems written to daughters, but its larded layers (of an earlier poem) and lines requoted are a textbook of encysted context.

The tough-guyisms of "To V.V." move from the gentler translations (Paz, Vallejo) to the problems of orally-preserved Serbian epic. "The Kossovo Maiden," this books's big pitch in that middlebreaking line I'm afraid pretends

that I care automatically about yet one more tribe's preoccupations and fetishes. All these which aren't cooked to a jumble of privacies urge me to pretend the culture's commonplaces are mine too, so the poet can write (*write*) the glowing golden ring, the blood of heroes, the pool of blood, the gates, a helmet made/Of wound white silk/with feathers joined, and the tell-tale article aside I'll not elevate these to icons.

His journal poems (*Batory & Lermontov*) are a natural extension of the earlier notation. The analogue to experience as rendered in the New Poems here is Stevenson, *Travels with a Donkey*, sentimental rock thrown through space (as in his poem on the Napoleon film). "Northern Summer" also reads a bit like Peacock in Wales, liking the oddities of language but (again) keeping access to his prejudices too:

> And I stare quizzically at what I've written here,
> at language that has used me one more time
> for consequential or inconsequential ends that
> are not mine.

Monosyllabics begin and end lines in four or five beats to cant the fives a bit, make them less expected. At least (part IX) he tells you when he's told lies.

> So Bothwell's route is mine. I'll stuff my mouth
> with herring, think of Anna Throndsen,
> and not return to Fife either with Maid of Norway
> or the Duke of Orkney's head.

The temptation is to cap it with a *New Yorker* tag but this is error. Matthias is a David Jones scholar, from the able *Introducing* Faber selection to (I'm told) a forthcoming *David Jones: Man and Poet* for National Poetry Foundation. *Anathemata* and Hill's *Mercian Hymns* (see the Matthias quote on the back of *Tenebrae*) define his interest as history as atmosphere. This can be a touting of Sutton Hoo, book jacket picturesque, but has a place in verse which Matthias ably and amply fills. His ley-line poems in *Another Chicago Magazine 15* interest me very much, and while this book is tipped *toward* that sort of thing I think the next collection will be it.

—GERALD BURNS

WORKS ON PAPER/ESSAYS BY ELIOT WEINBERGER
New Directions, 1986, $9.95

It is a chimaera of a book, its foreparts an unlikely Asiatic hybrid of dream, memory, tiger, crocodile and nightmare; while its hindquarters cast together two specifically human efforts, poetry and war. Eliot Weinberger has scattered disturbing, toughminded essays through various magazines for a decade. Now, with twenty of them laid end to end in a decisive progression, his writing displays a sure coherence. His, as he recounts, is a life

> . . .sustained, in this enameled garden of meaningless language, by poetry; by the belief, perhaps a wild belief, that there is a general sanity in the work, a sanity that rises above the notorious small madnesses of the workers themselves.

The book's foreparts, called "Inventions of Asia," pry into a range of documents—historical, photographic, and poetic—gathered from both East and West, to discern not Asia as she in some way *is*, but what Asia has meant and in what guises she continues to dress herself for the western observer. Ever since silk made its first appearance in the markets of Rome, the Asian continent has exerted a disturbing hold over the west. It is a disturbance that reaches profoundly into our psyche, and Weinberger uncovers in the course of his essays that strange brew of characteristics, seductive and terrifying, comforting and cruel, which have stirred all sorts of contradictory beliefs about Asia. Not truth, which seems generally weirder than fiction, but "invention" which blends the two. Weinberger begins wryly with "A Dream of India," a pastiche of accounts dealing with the South Asian subcontinent drawn from travellers and writers around the year 1492, the year Columbus went west looking for the East.

> In India it is the custom for foreign travellers to stay at inns. There the food is cooked for the guest by the landlady, who also makes the bed and sleeps with the stranger. They kill their parents when they are old and use the flesh for food.
>
> And I saw, deep in the interior, Venetian ducats in circulation, and gold coins twice the size of our florins.

Anyone who's travelled by foot, bus, or train across some stretch of that continent knows how unmistakably erotic its pull. Promises of exalted wisdom, artistic wealth, wild sexual and gastronomic pleasures. . .tempered, or, maybe, augmented, by the nagging threat of infection, infection somehow perceived as beyond the cure of medicine.

Works on Paper prods these fever'd dreams with Borgesian irony. It is an irony not derived from Weinberger's personal style however, which in these particular essays remains comparatively self-effacing, but one that emerges from the records themselves. There are the tangled influences of old rice-paper and banana-leaf poetry, clues to modern states of affair in the West, and without which our own 20th century poetry would be inconceivable. But he gives equal accord to other "works on paper," photodocumentary and newspaper accounts—incomplete, misleading, at times incomprehensible. These as likely lead into cold hell's thicket as the other document lead into delicate reverie. For those who, like Weinberger, study, travel, or just plain pay attention to Asia, encounters with contemporary events can quickly transport language to the point where its terms falter, or bludgeon like a club. At those extremes "works on paper" may refer to the inalterable documents of bureaucracy, a place where words exhibit a sinister and irrationally precise fit to some invented world of law; or to that "enameled garden" the daily news is; and finally, to that vanishing point where words become mere body-count, stacking up like so many meaningless integers, blunted into unaccountability by the acts of men.

In "Kampuchea" Weinberger tries to comprehend the Khmer Rouge reorganization of Cambodia, a period of scarcely documented history to which only statistics seem fitted:

> –Of 50,000 monks, 900 survived;
> –Of 300 journalists, 5 survived;
> –Of 416 art students, 14 survived;
> –Of 41 librarians, 6 survived;
> –Of 24,336 teachers and professors, 3,050 survived.

Maybe this passage's cruelest irony, lingering like the hollow feeling a bad dream leaves after its images have deserted memory, is how much, on the page, words themselves resemble—*poetry*. The rhythmic language an almost hypnotic litany, anaphora and insistently repetitive end-rhymes submerging the facts. Only context tells us this is not poetry.

And it si context that provides *Works on Paper* with its testing-ground for poetry. Not only the "notorious small madnesses" of the poets themselves, but the dishearteningly large madnesses that disturb our planet. There is a good case for the current suspicion that no poetry, however deftly composed, can possibly sanitize these aberrations. This fear, that words may no longer possess the power to rectify *things*, seems to drive Weinberger's essays, despite his declared wild belief to the contrary. It lends his critiques of poetry an at times unrelenting acerbity.

"Extensions of Poetry," the book's second half, tries to measure the poetry of our present century by its adequacy or inadequacy of response to the imperatives of war, bigotry, and potential nuclear cataclysm. "Peace on Earth" begins as a brooding meditation on John Taggart's poem of that title. But in order to sound out the efficacy of the poem, which purports to cleanse the wounds of America's Indo-China war, the essay has to detour along a swiftly informative history of the relationship between poetry and war in this century. The essay makes one thing clear: nobody else writing criticism today brings historical research so convincingly to poetry as Weinberger. Certainly, very few give it the effort. This, his historical sense, is what makes him one of the handful whose criticism is consistently worth reading. It takes evident effort, but the man manages to *live* in history–strange dwelling place, about as unfamiliar to an American as a yurt or igloo. It means though, you find more tough information and hard good sense on a page of Weinberger's prose than just about anywhere else these days. Even when you disagree with him. The man's willing to go to the library, the newspaper, or the modernist poem –and read them all with the same eye.

The book closes with it most inflammatory essay, "The Modernists in the Basement and the Stars Above." This piece originally appeared in *Sulfur*, winter of 1984, examining and adding to the fallout from E. Fuller Torrey's book *The Roots of Treason: Ezra Pound and the Secrets of St. Elizabeths*. It set off an immediate squall of response and counter-response. Like many of the essays reprinted in his book, Weinberger's extensively reworked it. After the spate of letters, it did require some rethinking, not so much in its central theme, as in several tangential considerations. But in rewriting the essay Weinberger all but dropped Torrey's book from his account, an account which scouted the battle lines of bigotry and fascism in modernist poetry. He'd referred to *The Roots of Treason* as "that wasp's nest lobbed onto the assembly-line of the Pound industry." The phrase is vintage Weinberger–probably an acquired taste–and swipes in a lot of directions at once, as did the whole essay. I'm not lamenting the loss of a single phrase, etched in acid as it may be, nor some half dozen others I'd like equally well to quote. What I mean is, aside from the essay seeming a bit deflated without Torrey, it was his goddamn book that arrived as a big *event*–in history–for those few of us who still give a goddamn about poetry–and any future examination we take to the modernist underbelly of bigotry and warmongering, has *got* to acknowledge Torrey's book as an occasion. Even if it *is* just a deplorably written book by a pop psychoanalyst. Not to admit this–loud & direct–that this guy with no sense of poetry himself set off a lot of self-scrutiny among those who take poetry for their work, is to discount just that historical sense which I for one see as imperative; and to which Weinberger as much as any other contemporary writer keeps us attuned.

But maybe this also unearths an important question about the writing of prose. Do I detect a basic insecurity about the so-called *book review* as a valid piece of writing? As if one's prose had somehow greater steel when not built over some other man or woman's book? The volume of Poe's collected criticism issued a couple of years ago should at least reprieve us from *that* fear—essays well worth the read, some of our best in fact, though the specific books that occasioned them have been long since pulped.

Insecurity about what a prose writer is doing haunts the written document in America from the beginning. Maybe it's our best legacy, tormenting as it may be to the practitioners. I began by calling Weinberger's book a chimaera. And it is—just as the best prose written by Americans always has been. *The Maine Woods, Moby Dick,* the papers of Jaime de Angulo (which still need a competent editor to gather them together into that cohesive, forceful epic they are). I don't mean Weinberger's achieved anything of that stature yet. But he ain't a hack reviewer. When he works on paper it's worth reading.

—ANDREW SCHELLING

GABRIELA MISTRAL

"What the soul does for the body, so does the poet for her people"
(Epitaph on Gabriela Mistral's tomb)

"Modernism" in Latin American literature (exemplified by Ruben Dario: an *Apollonian* poetry of swan songs and metrical pyrotechnics) fizzles out with the decadent, European aristocracy on which it depended. Mistral, dusty, provincial, wearing size-ten shoes, walks in and over the fin de siecle lounge lizards. And she also scorns "the new woman who dances and agitates in plazas and salons and scarcely knows the child she has carried, nailed in her womb." Rather, like HD, her verse and thought are tributaries of the distant past: "we become what we were / the circle of grace / the return of the pilgrim / the legend begun again / like a river or road. . . ." She searches out and walks with the women of Greece, the prophets of Israel, the gods and goddesses of Quechua, Aztec, Mayan legend. Progress is a return to origins, the well-spring of myth. This self-taught woman who came out of Chile's impoverished rural middle-class was free to choose her own masters: Emerson, Tagore, Montaigne, the Russian novelists are among her earliest ones. But no

text influences her as strongly as the extremes of her natal landscape of the isolated Valle de Elqui in Chile's semi-arid north: "I have what was lost / and I carry my infancy / like a favorite flower / that perfumes my hand."

From the start, critics complained that her work was unschooled, unrestrained, unfeminine. "I write for the women of America," she replied. "Perhaps without preparations but with much love." Rejection taught her a style and a tone of solitude intact. *Saudade*, she called it, from Portuguese: *aloneness*. It is a raw longing, not soft-edged nostalgia, as in this lullaby: "I who have lost all / Now tremble with sleep. / Don't slip from my arms / Sleep close to me!" The scarce sentimentalism she allowed in her early volumes, *Desolacion* (1922) and *Ternura* (1924), is burned to stubble in what she termed the "hallucinated material" of her later poetry, in *Tala* (1938: "Felling Trees") and *Lagar* (1954): "Wine Press").

Rejection also gave her an identity, for poetic identity is always other. With unyielding fanaticism she seeks out the motherbond. It is in the shimmering light of the immediate present, as in her series of poem/prose-medallions, "Elegies to the Things of the Land": crystal, salt, water, ash, stone, fire. The remote past becomes murderously alive, as when the poet speaks as "Electra in the Fog": "She was my mother and I was her milk / her milk became blood, no more. . . / the night is riddled with her / open with her, alive with her." Her female body haunts and shames her. Always passionate, her language bears the graphic intensity of the Spanish-Jewish mystics John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. She rolls from adoration to repulsion, concealing no wounds. Open, violated: in a culture for which *recato* (modesty, reserve) is the primary feminine virtue, she is indiscreet.

Contemporary feminists have been rediscovering the generation of revolutionary women poets to which Mistral belonged. They have preferred the more cultivated dramas of romantic love, and the verses of Alfonsina Storni (Argentina) and Juana de Ibarbourou (Uruguay). Perhaps Mistral's untutored vehemence and her indifference to women's political "solidarity" embarrasses them. Latin Americanists for whom politics, film, "new narrative" are all the rage, have similarly passed over the work of this strange poet who defies categorization. Like Dickinson, standard criticism has been unable to cope with the sheer nerve and ambitions of this woman's verse: she plays the limits, undoing the sanctions.

—ELIZABETH HORAN

A REVIEW OF SHERMAN PAUL'S *IN SEARCH OF THE PRIMITIVE: REREADING DAVID ANTIN, JEROME ROTHENBERG, AND GARY SNYDER* (Louisiana State University Press, 1986) AND *IN LOVE WITH THE GRATUITOUS: REREADING ARMAND SCHWERNER* (North Dakota Quarterly, 1986)

Perhaps there's no such thing as an old Emersonian. Though Sherman Paul has been around for a long time (he earned the respect of fellow scholars for his writing on American authors of established reputation—Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edmund Wilson, and Hart Crane among them), his recent work is especially welcome because it attends a poetry too often neglected by academic critics. It provides the dedicated reader with both map and travelogue, not misreading but rereading: it is a sequel to a sequel, one man's road back, through writing, to the primary force of speech and, ultimately, on to the Great Goddess by way of the poets (shamans and tricksters all) who actively seek her out. If the territory is unfamiliar, the reader would do well to take warning from Professor Paul's 1981 "Preface" to *The Lost America of Love: Rereading Robert Creeley, Edward Dorn, and Robert Duncan* (part of which is reprinted in the introduction to the rereading of Schwerner), and come prepared: "A final word. Every critical book, and especially one of this kind, should be prefaced: to be read in the company of—as an accompaniment to—the poems." (*LAL* xiv)

Excellent advice, but what is implied here? Gary Snyder's work is easy enough to come by, but how many readers are likely to have the complete works of Jerome Rothenberg at their fingertips? How many of us live in cities where the public library lists in its catalog even one book by David Antin? And as for Armand Schwerner—well, without access to the magnificent collection of contemporary poetry at SUNY-Buffalo, I too would be in trouble. It ought to be otherwise, perhaps—but the fact is that there are fewer rereaders of this poetry, and it's the first-time readers who are most in need of a good guide. Then, too, from another perspective, one might ask if it is wise —or even possible—to provide a supplement to a text without in some sense replacing, re-presenting it. (I personally welcome the use of extensive citation in critical writing.) Sherman Paul is not distracted by such theoretical or practical questions. Nor is he in the business of providing introductions—not only does he refrain from burdening *In Search of the Primitive* with large chunks of quotation, but he is also most reluctant to assume critical authority, to become, for instance, what Hugh Kenner calls "a poetry-relator," an evaluator and assessor of the new, setting it out as if for sale. He agrees with David Antin that the "truly contemporaneous artists of our time are known primarily to a community consisting of themselves." (*ISP* 6) It troubles me that Sherman Paul seems resigned to this situation. Alternative stances exist:

I think, for instance, of the restless Antonin Artaud, his harsh refusals and indirections: ". . .It is the act which shapes the thought." (*AA* 67) Perhaps, in this respect, Sherman Paul settles for too little. Perhaps he is betrayed by his method.

Not that his method is unattractive. Again, from the earlier "Preface": "Criticism of this kind is also open because it waives judgment, no longer assumes a sovereign mind speaking for established tradition." (*ILG* 1) The rereadings are recorded in a series of dated journal entries (from 9 March 1981 to 23 April 1983 for *In Search of the Primitive*; from 10 May 1985 to 28 June 1985 for *In Love with the Gratuitous*: how refreshing such acknowledgement of critical activity as happening, like poetry, like music, so clearly in time!); it is indeed "open criticism, an open form for critical thought comparable to open forms of poetic thought. . ." (*ILG* 1) He explains himself and where he's come from with real eloquence:

> Could I have studied Olson and not have heeded his insistence of enacting thought, on finding a form for the immediate activity of thought itself? (. . .) Meditation itself is open and wayward, answering (it is all an answering) less to intention than to the desire to write—to enter that wonderful activity—in whatever way and to whatever end the occasion prompts one. To trust language and the particular moment–and the particulars of the moment—and to encounter the poem with one's present resources! That is the risk. Now. And no revisions, no second thoughts, just first thoughts, the best thoughts, Ginsberg believes, those, as Emerson found, that agree with third thoughts! (*ILG* 1)

Of course one senses a little self-indulgence here, but it can be pleasant to go along with such an honest, unpretentious fellow. He travels with Whitman and Kerouac in sight, a literary pioneer making his way across the country, moving (albeit unevenly) from New York (where, citing George Butterick, he imagines Emerson listening to Antin holding forth "in the CCNY cafeteria, circa 1952") (*ISP* 61) and then on into Indian territory (there's Jerome Rothenberg at the center of it all) and finally all the way up the mountains and caverns of the far west (into Gary Snyder's high preserve). He begins, he says, "with irritation" and the question of the artist's critical "striking power" (*ISP* 3); he ends in telling the peace of a poet's dream, in "a cave or underground room entirely covered with breasts that nurture him." (*ISP* 297) In this sense, it's only (appropriately) his own journey he records, his own nostalgia. Unlike David Antin, who explores the surfaces of thought by moving out to the edges of language as social fact and spoken improvisation, Sherman Paul writes as if in response to a more traditionally resonant, almost transcendental, inner calling: "The practice and poetics of journeying (and journals) belong to the spiritual vocation of what Emerson, in 'Circles,' calls 'the onward way.'" (*ISP* 287)

And, gentleman scholar that he is, he never insists on having the last word. "The poets treated here have been generous in their response. . .": at the end of each section some letters from the poet (and sometimes the critic) in question appear (*ISP* ix). One has the sense of listening in on a continuing conversation. This innovation not only makes *In Search of the Primitive* what Sherman Paul now calls "openly dialogical" but also provides it with a tension it otherwise lacks. For instance, here is Sherman Paul on 1 December 1981, pondering Jerome Rothenberg's *Poland/1931*:

> Living in our time does not make it any easier to feel *placed*. . .Because all of us—isn't this the burden of Rothenberg's work?—have in his large view of human history been exiled from the tribe to the state, from the primitive to the civilized, and are still wandering in search of the primitive (Stanley Diamond names *the* project) in search of the communality that will allow us to be fully human. (*ISP* 127)

This leads to a consideration of "what Rothenberg has at stake" in what may be his most controversial piece of writing: "Harold Bloom: The Critic as Exterminating Angel" (it appeared in *Sulfur 2*) where Bloom is compared to Dr. Josef Mengele "—who separated the victims bound directly for the gas chambers from those healthy enough to be spared for terminal labor assignments." (*Sulfur 2* p. 4) It is strong satire; Sherman Paul is understandably disturbed:

> In fact, I sat down this morning to explain to myself, if I could, the enormity of his comparing Bloom to the "exterminating angel" of Auschwitz. (. . .) I am offended by Rothenberg's assimilation of Bloom to the *Malakh ha-Mavat* because it is an unworthy act, much too *ad hominem* (perhaps only as it can be when Jew confronts Jew?), in no way commensurate with Bloom's "offenses." (*ISP* 127)

In a letter dated 31 July 1983 (reprinted at the end of the chapter), Jerome Rothenberg replies:

> While I understand perfectly well your objection to my essay, I don't see it, for all of that, as entirely without playfulness. . .The *Malakh ha-Mavat* image—without which you would not have thought this such an "enormity"—I felt to have been raised by Bloom and not by me. Clearly, once I've articulated it, I dismiss it myself as, in any literal sense, a "hyperbole" and "absurdity"; but clearly too the dealing out of "life" & "death" is a hyperbolic presumption on Bloom's part. (*ISP* 174)

Rothenberg goes on to explain the circumstances of his writing: ". . .if you want a sense of what was in my mind then, here is Bloom's letter, after the self-introductory and sometimes personal opening:"

> But your vision & mine are *very* close. It is a puzzle to me—I read Ashbery & Rothenberg—his language ravishes me more (though yours, to me, the strongest in your tradition) but your substance & drive are where I find myself. Reluctantly, because I had the full Orthodox & normative education, & am still upset to find myself among the *Minim.* (*ISP* 175)

And so it goes, a fascinating exchange, a little more light on the history of American letters, a shadowy question of critical authority.

Critical authority—and the authority of writing—is a central issue for Armand Schwerner as well: in *The Tablets*, he creates "a modern poem that, to a large extent because of scholarly apparatus, seems archaic. The tablets represent the birth of writing (writing and selfhood) in a culture considered the cradle of civilization. . ." (*ILG* 26) The humor opening out here seems to me entirely without bitterness, and the specific contemporary situation of these little-known works (happily, all of "Tablet XXV" is printed here) gives Sherman Paul perhaps his best opportunity to realize his own creative role:

> Interpretation is the very essence of modernism. Schwerner emphasizes this by telling us at the outset that the tablets are mediated by a scholar-translator who "presents" them and by the author who, in turn, "transmits" them "through" himself. The keys to what is untranslatable (. . .), missing (+++), variant reading [(?)], or supplied by the scholar-translator ([ ]) suggest the difficulties of *presentation* as well as our interpretations which must take in account the notes of the scholar's and Schwerner's interpretations. Schwerner has made a poem—and remakes it in each performance—that we must make. (*ILG* 27)

In inventing *The Tablets*, as Sherman Paul points out, Schwerner "recovers them from underground in the originary work of *poesis*. This, for him, is soul work, not only life-tracking-life, as Creeley says, but soul-making, the term Hillman takes from Keats to name the end *psychologizing* serves." (*ILG* 3)

The gentle meditation of Sherman Paul is also *poesis*. He does not cover up the texts he reads—rather, he makes his way in writing around them, here checking out what irritates, there stepping back to admire, now and then stopping for a close look or a moment of communion. You can trust him as far as he goes. But those readers still looking for adventure, still not quite ready to circle back, may want to take a different route. I think again of Antonin Artaud, his terrifying fragmented search, his electric intensity:

> The conclusion to all this can only be found on the spot, and it is most important to recognize that which in modern rituals can subsist from

ancient magic and ancient divination.
Are there still forests which speak?. . ." (*AA* 68)

"Open criticism" need not be "all an answering": the questions also call us on.

—LINDA REINFELD

NOTE

Works cited are abbreviated in the text above as follows: *The Lost America of Love* as *LAL*, *In Search of the Primitive* as *ISP*, *In Love with the Gratuitous* as *ILG*; Antonin Artaud's "It is the act which shapes the thought. . .[A Fragment]" as translated by Raymond Federman in *Antonin Artaud Anthology*, edited by Jack Hirschman (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1965) as *AA*.

THE BOAT OF QUIET HOURS BY JANE KENYON
Graywolf Press, Saint Paul, MN, $8.00 Paper

The short title for Jane Kenyon's new book is *Doing Things While Thinking of Something Else*. Midnight blue speckled enamel is sky, and for a nagging memory

> The clothesline rises in the wind. One
> wooden pin is left, solitary as a finger;
> it, too, rises and falls.

And this is all setup, so quotes fall flat. What's significant is that these (images, even, what an old-fashioned thing) occur in a milieu and in magazines in which the aperçu *is* excerptible without loss, like a cartoon caption imperfectly remembered. Clampitt and Gregg, who are extremely able, would seem to be her sisters, and she prints in places which welcome recognizables. Yet she leaves these, them, behind, from your sense that she *must* do this. I don't quote particularly luscious ones to save them but, sideshow talker, urge people to trust me without seeing what's inside. The showman's allusion comes up because these *are* setups, as the sunwarmed "porch" of moss beside a stone in snow is a setup for her, saving some part of a day she'd rued. These savings could be homey, homemakery but aren't, because her imagination is unforgiving. Her voice is warm but the hands are Strangelove's. If anything snow plows, calvings and people dead of cancer remind you of Hughes's *Moortown*. "What Came to Me" is the title of a very good short one; things

leap to match her mood. This is not (again) pathos quilted to fallacy though the felicity, almost the obedience, of this performing world calls depth in question. "Wash" is a good poem, facing "No Steps." Some reinstate—really reinstate—the sketch as a verse genre, ending like unviewfindered snapshots, bit of hose, half a tricycle, the dull side of the house.

I was going to say these are intimate yet unrevealing—dusk poems like Jimenez's, life inferred from tone. As I try to think about them the classes widen—Kumin's first book and the woman with the umlaut, slight smell of baking with a glint off Dr. Moreau's eyeglasses, the poet as Orrible Clinician. I suppose this goes back to Tennyson. Then Stafford for the five-beat school poems (try "The Little Boat"). These don't map, in the end (which may be why they remind us of Hughes). Her nonendinged narratives are almost the best of her. She could do a novel in verse, *Aurora Leigh* or *The Bothie*, creditably, and that in a lyrickish age says lots.

—GERALD BURNS

LEFT OUT IN THE RAIN: NEW POEMS 1947-1985
Gary Snyder, North Point, 209 pp., $9.95 Paper

Reading Gary Snyder's *Left Out in the Rain: New Poems 1947-1985* is a bit like going to a three-star restaurant on the chef's day off. We get many of the courses that a collected would put before us, as well as some of the panoramic pleasures, but we don't leave the table with the glow of a fully gratified palate. I question the publishing strategy. Right at that point in the poet's career when we might look for a fat retrospective volume, we are presented with four decades' worth of out-takes. Poems that Snyder for one reason or another decided not to include in other collections are now amassed under the rubric "new poems."

The danger, of course, is that trigger-happy critics might use this as a basis for measuring the whole *oeuvre*. *Left Out in the Rain* would not stand up well under such scrutiny. Too many of the inclusions represent near-misses, poems saved for an image, an idea, or because they had some associational meaning for their author. Don't get me wrong, though. This book is not a disaster. Its spirit is of such confident, genial permissiveness that we end up enjoying it for what it really is: a glance into the poet's laboratory.

Left Out in the Rain is portioned off into epochs, beginning with two poems from the late 1940s. While that work still shows the haphazard wingbeats of the fledgling, it does allow us to see what Snyder had to outgrow in

order to reach poetic maturity. The familiar subject matter is there, but the perception is still alloyed with rhetoric. Snyder has not yet learned the sharp adz strokes that will eventually become his trademark. The lines, like those from "Elk Trails," have still to be pared into distinction:

> I have walked you, ancient trails,
> Along the narrow rocky ridges
> High above the mountains that
> Make up your world:

It won't be long, though, before "I" becomes *eye*.

What's interesting about Snyder, to my mind, is the fact that he schooled a deeply Western sensibility in Eastern ways, without ever becoming ersatz-Eastern. His minimalism retains a hard American bite. Here, complete, is "Seeing the Ox" from the central 1959-1969 section:

> Brown ox
> Nose snubbed up
> Locking his big head high
> against telephone pole
> right by Daitoku temple—
> Slobbering, watching kids play
> with rolling eye,
> Fresh dung pile under his
> own hind hooves.

I like the intimated clash of perspectives: ancient, heraldic creature and telephone pole, temple and dung; the ox's indolent immobility is foregrounded against the play activity. Snyder is not straining to get any recoil effect from the juxtapositions. Only the slight double-take in the spacing between "Daitoku" and "temple" alerts us to the bemused perplexity of the outsider. It's not vintage Snyder, but it's nice to have.

Snyder's enduring contribution is to have trained a disciplined, facet-cutting eye upon the primaeval terrain of the Pacific Northwest. His pure, staggered lines have become the signature of a kind of perception, a respectful registry of a durable and deeply structured *out there*. In this, they are not unlike Cezanne's delicately layered planes. But *Left Out in the Rain* shows little of this side of Snyder. What we get instead are episodic snapshots from the many locales of his life—the Indian Ocean, Kyoto, Lookout Mountain, Turtle Island. Still, underneath the changing surface of subjects and occasions, it is possible to sense the willed life gradually becoming the real life. Style tells the whole story.

Early Snyder is very much the poet trying to fit himself into an admired mode. We can almost feel the muscular expenditure behind the reductions in these lines:

Flickering eye
Peers from a birdcage
    shivering lips of bone
    scratch, and a taste of shell
Feathers cram the mouth.

—from "A Change of Straw" (1949-1952)

Whereas a poem like "The Net" from the 1974-1984 grouping allows us to see how natural such moves have become:

A man in a canoe
Catching fish by dancing–
    "hey, fish by casting with a net!"
Women in the evening circle
casting, round a fire
A man in a canoe
Dances with a net.

The first quotation belongs to a poet who is trying to tell us everything he knows; the second just hints at a bountiful lore, understands that worthy subjects can never be fully encompassed.

The least successful part of this collection is the section placed last: "Satires, Inventions, & Diversions 1951-1980." If the thrust of Snyder's effort over the years has been to refine a cleansed and natural idiom, then these are exercises in self-opposition:

You joyous Gods, who gave mankind his culture,
And you, brave nymphs, who taught him love of Nature,

—from "Sestina of the End of the Kalpa"

or:

Here's the last drunk song I'll sing
Of all the balls we had this Spring.

—from "Ballad of Rolling Heads"

Every poet, to be sure, sends out tracers in different directions. But not every poet puts this in a book. The unintentional effect of these sorties is to remind us of what we most treasure about Snyder. He has spent forty years now doing "the real work"—it's time we had a volume honoring *that.*

—SVEN BIRKERTS

PAUL CELAN: LAST POEMS
A Bilingual Edition Translated by Katherine Washburn and Margaret Guillemin
North Point Press, 212 pp., $20.00

Ladies and gentlemen![1]

Dear Reader,[2]

The purpose of what I would like to say is to describe for you some of what is buried in these LAST POEMS, as in, for instance, the intimately transcendent signs of a writing attendant to *the mystery of an encounter. Art, you will remember, reappears* where the necessity of encounter *produces a distance from the I.* This means the necessity—and the purpose of what I would like to say—is to describe for you what *is found* when *art in this form constitutes the subject of* an encounter to which *one would like* to come from a natural distance to be absorbed in the restoration of language, to a name or poem where *language acquires a voice*—as in the last name or poem where language is ever likely to acquire a voice. *Ladies and gentlemen, please take note: One would like to, not: I would like to. Art produces a distance from the I:*

"I was born under the name Paul Antschel," he said,—"in Czernowitz the capital of Romanian Bukovina in 1920 part German speaking Jew and then the Nazis, you know who they are, came—and in 1947 the name changed like a movable front or occupation the anagram of a changed intelligence which entered me," he said, "the complex of a persecuted intelligence housed in April 1970 under the name of the poet Paul Celan a suicide by drowning and the Nazis, you know who they are, came with it," he said:

> ONCE, when death was mobbed,
> you took shelter in me.
>
> (from *Lichtzwang*,
> *Force of Light*)

Ladies and gentlemen, Dear Reader, Explication has it: By force of light a kind of glaring intelligence takes over the poem with the talk of too much, too little, not of Thou and thou again but the talking *of* our *going-to-our-deaths together* by music as in the instrumental programs played out at the height of the crematoriums—one example that comes up among the many still to be found *in the air, in the air which we have to breathe.* By force of light a kind of glaring intelligence takes over the poem and assumes that "once" outside you and me the evidence will rise after all to count on what *we* know, like the numbers of us that multiply after us as in for instance "when death was mobbed," where there is *no*, not even, room for the dead to be

found *in the air which we have to breathe.* "You," however, coming from a point beyond death or "death beyond death" (Levinas), assume none of these imperial intelligences. Rather, at one point "you" are led, and your reading empties onto the site of deepest refuge in "me." This means *as-always:* "you took shelter in me." This means again: the LAST POEMS written seek bearing time to become perceptible by *sending oneself ahead to oneself* while returning at times to *a kind of homecoming. Can we now, perhaps, find the place*—when only the void stood between us and we found our full ways to each other.

One would like to find, ladies and gentlemen, one would like to find the full ways to approach these LAST POEMS written out to occupy space. One would like to *find something here* like the sign of a blackbird—ansel—rising to encounter the anagram of a changed intelligence—Celan—an alien intelligence approaching the last name or poem in which language acquires a voice to occupy space:

> APPROACHABLE
> the one–
> winged soaring blackbird,
> above the firewall, behind
> Paris, up there,
> in the
> poem.
>
> (from *Lichtzwang,*
> *Force of Light*)

Up there in the poem the LAST POEMS are found, and the law of inversion applies—one would like to say appears—at last a nearness (that comes) to a natural distance, at least as near as all that is lost, and that I would like to describe for you here as home or space or home as space to which the poem ascends,

> CLEARED for this
> departure too . . .

as it abandons a region within itself, a region to be filled by all poems written out before and after it—up there, where *the poem takes its position at the edge of itself,* where it becomes you, outside, from this point on, *as-always* meaning:

> . . . what's left of you, sets itself aslant,
> you gain
> altitude.
>
> (from *Lichtzwang,*
> *Force of Light*)

From this point on one is close to inhabiting the Kabbalistic doctrine of Tsimtsum, first revealed to his disciples by Isaac Luria of Safed. Here the presence of God does not become his concentration at a point, but his withdrawal from it, so that in the first act of creation *we are outside, at a considerable distance*—the more visibly occupying the site of his withdrawal the deeper he recedes into himself. Imagine the impulse towards the first poem as a similar contraction,

> . . . hide yourself within . . . ,

and the LAST POEMS as its inevitable projection into a clearing,

> . . . out there.
>
> (from *Lichtzwang*,
> *Force of Light*)

Imagine that you "tear from me this body and this soul to make things for yourself, and leave me only, eternally, that tearing itself." (Simone Weil) In this sundering form imagine the LAST POEMS, and you *are* thrown *outside, at a considerable distance*:

> DISCUS,
> starred with premonitions,
> throw yourself
> out of yourself.
>
> (from *Lichtzwang*,
> *Force of Light*)

Ladies and gentlemen, when you are thrown out of yourself to an encounter, your voice comes full circle to the province of a shared dislocation between languages. It comes to translation, and you are intimately pressured to face it—*this appearing, it becomes dialogue, it is often despairing dialogue.* One might, for example, speak of this encounter with the LAST POEMS in English—I am speaking now of the translator's encounter—as an act of translation that bears more the given vocabulary of the prehistoric original than its *"movements" and "suggestions"* or the intentions which represent its hidden significance. In this latter form of translation what must be found is that direction of the original which acquires a language and whose language acquires a voice through which the LAST POEMS written out to occupy space return "from the midst, in the midst" (Celan) of an afterlife of "boundless dispersion" (Blanchot), to prey—in the accusative—on earth. This, I believe, is not the direction followed or the place returned to in the language of the LAST POEMS to exit in English.[3] One would like to dispel their competency or

the intelligence of their reasoned arrangement as in for instance the sequence that comes to

DIE RÜCKWÄRTGESPROCHENEN
Namen, alle . . . ,

ALL THE NAMES
spoken backward . . . ,
(from *Lichtzwang*,
Force of Light)

for a syntax more primitively spelled, compounding the movement of the original, backwards—

THE-BACKWARD-SPOKEN
Names, all . . . ,

where in the original "alle"—"all"—is not primary, but a source into which the names are emptied, returned to.

One would like to trust the level of risk in translation necessary to touch this primitive source—"the trough of being"—(Celan) from which the original LAST POEMS breathe and which in return, risking their own asphyxiation, breathe upon your trust from the volumes that enclose them: by *Force of Light*, in *Snow-Part*, across the *Farmstead of Time*, through *Conversation in the Mountains*. In these forms the definition of risk in translation pressures into being a whirled, *despairing dialogue* with the original, "from the midst, in the midst" of what is not yours, as closely accused as remote, not

. . . Todes quitt, Gottes
quitt.

. . . rid of death, rid
of God.
(from *Lichtzwang*,
Force of Light)

but compounded as—

even-quit of death,
even-quit of God.

where in the original LAST POEMS "quitt" would share at the source of its meaning both "quit" and "even," as if one would assume to get even by abandoning the original at the level of risking the absolute—*the absolute poem* which *doesn't exist* and which is as near as all that is lost.

Ladies and gentlemen, permit me at this point to quote a statement *which occurs in Walter Benjamin's essay on* "The Task of the Translator": "Translation keeps putting the hallowed growth of languages to the test: How far removed is their hidden meaning from revelation, how close can it be brought by the knowledge of this remoteness."

"By the knowledge of this remoteness" *I think that I have encountered* the LAST POEMS to perceive *language as form and direction and breath. Here, too, in this work of* Celan, *I am searching for the very same thing. I am searching for* Celan *himself, I am searching for him, as a person, I am searching for his form: for the sake of the location of literature, the setting free, the step. The poem, I believe, also seeks this place.* To respond to it one must begin by taking your questions–

> . . . up there,
> in the
> poem.

the voice says:

> . . . two fingers are snapping
> in the abyss, a
> world is stirring
> in the scratch-sheets, it all depends
> on you.
>
> (from *Zeitgehöft,*
> *Farmstead of Time*)

> . . . where you
> are seeking me, blindfold.
>
> (from *Lichtzwang,*
> *Force of Light*)

The voice, *I believe, also seeks this place. With you and* Paul Celan *and the* LAST POEMS *I believe that I have just now touched it again.*

—BENJAMIN HOLLANDER

Footnotes

[1] All references in italics, excluding the titles of the volumes in *LAST POEMS*, are excerpted from Paul Celan's "Meridean" speech, given by the poet in 1960 upon his acceptance of the George Büchner Prize for Literature.

[2] Some unquoted references in this piece are taken from poems of Celan not included in *LAST POEMS*.

[3] "I do not want to undermine the sincere and intensive efforts made by Katherine Washburn and Margaret Guillemin in translating Celan's *LAST POEMS*. The translations

are, for the most part, admirable, sensitive and intelligent renderings of the original poems which even manage at times to generate resonances in the English that do not exist in the German but which faithfully respond to the intentions behind the *whole* of the *LAST POEMS* as they appear in this selected edition by North Point Press. In other words, there *are* occasional moments in which the hidden significances behind the originals are illuminated by the translations. My quarrel is that these moments are only occasional, and that the risks they assume are not followed throughout the book. The necessity to engage these risks throughout should be recognized as a complex ideal to be achieved, and the fact that they are not always realized should not make us any less grateful to the translators for giving us these *LAST POEMS* in English."

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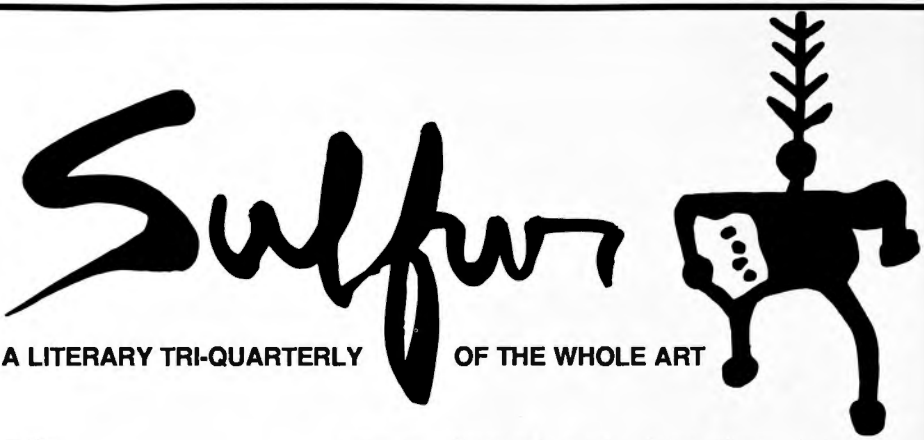

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